CONVICT 99

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A True Story of Penal Servitude

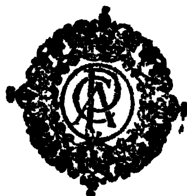
BY

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LONDON

C. ARTHUR PEARSON Ltd

First Published at 1s net, April 1917
Reprinted, May, 1918

CONTENTS

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CHAPTER I

THE LOVERS

"GERALDINE, listen- I love you! I have loved you for months, but have never dared to tell you, because you were so beautiful, so delicate, so far above me. You have been brought up in luxury, while I—only a few years ago I was working in a dark, grimy Lancashire town, where I was born, and where my parents lived and worked humbly before me. But those dark factory towns breed hearts as true as ever came out of palaces; and, Geraldine, with all my true heart I love you."

The man who spoke these passionate words, and the girl to whom they were addressed, were standing in one of the conservatories of Fenton Court, the large and picturesque gabled house in Hampstead that was the home of Mr. Christopher Lucas, the rich city merchant. There was a ball at his house that night, at which his motherless daughter, Geraldine, reigned both as hostess and as belle; and so much was she sought after, so eagerly did men compete for the honour and delight of a word, a look, a smile, from her, that it was only with difficulty that Laurence Gray had led her apart for a moment from the brilliant crowd into the stillness and shadow of the farthest conservatory.

She stood there now among the waving palms and massed azaleas, one of the loveliest women, surely, that ever graced this earth. Her eyes were of that rare velvety violet that is as if a heart s-ease had been set under the blue-veined, satin lid, and the soft masses of her hair glistened like gold. The skin of her bare arms and shoulders gleamed pure, white, and smooth as marble against the shadowy background of dark leaves.

Her figure was tall, and its beautiful curves were

clearly shown by the exquisite dress of faintest primrose silk, that fell about her in a mystery of subtle folds, and trailed in shining billows behind her on the mosaic floor. She was, as yet, scarcely nineteen, but she had the ripened dignity and grace of a young princess.

The man who stood before her, waiting for her reply, looked worthy of any woman's love. His face, glowing now with the ardour of a passion and tenderness inexpressible in words, was at once refined and strong. His handsome brown eyes looked out, fearlessly, from under straight dark brows, and the noble forehead above was crowned with thick curling hair of a rich dark brown.

There needed but one glance at those frank eyes to know that his nature was brave and loyal, and his heart a prize of whose winning even the best of women might be proud.

"Geraldine," he pleaded, as she delayed to speak, "won't you answer me?"

She looked up then, half tenderly, half shyly.

"I will give you your answer to-morrow," she said. "Come in the evening. I am too hurried now. I cannot think in all this movement, and music, and glare, and this question that you have asked me is a question that I dare not answer lightly." She paused a moment. Then she said, in a changed tone: "Take me back to my guests, Laurence. We have been here long enough. Father will be wondering where I am."

Laurence! She had never called him by this name before. Thrilled with a stronger hope, he did as she wished, and led her back to the noisy, laughing crowd. Already, before they had left the conservatory, the harmonious beat of the music reached them, and the rhythm of the dancers' feet. He thought her hand trembled on his arm. But she said nothing.

Everyone looked at them as they re-entered the ball-room; all eyes seemed to be searching their faces, trying to read what had occurred between them.

Mr. Lucas himself, a short, stout, kind-looking old gentleman, with white hair, hurried up to them, accompanied by a dark-bearded young man, who bore the name of Ralph Vickers. This Mr. Vickers addressed Geraldine

Lucas familiarly, as one who knew her well, and it was noticeable that she, who was all sweetness and gentleness, turned from him coldly and with few words, while the smile that had hovered like fleeting sunshine about her lovely mouth died suddenly away.

CHAPTER II

LAURENCE GRAY TELLS HIS STORY

It was eight o'clock on the following evening when Laurence Gray rang at the entrance of Fenton Court, and was shown into the familiar gold and white drawing-room. Geraldine Lucas was there alone, waiting for him. She was in her dinner-dress, and its dark purple richness set off her wonderful beauty better even than the tender primrose silk had done on the night before. Her face was changed a little, too; it was softer, sweeter, more radiant. As soon as he met her eyes Laurence knew what answer she would give.

"Dearest! oh, my dearest!" he exclaimed, in his sudden, uncontrollable gladness and thankfulness.

She let him clasp her in his arms and hold her close against his breast.

"I knew last night that I loved you," she whispered, "only I could not tell you then. It was too sudden."

"My darling," he said, in a low, broken voice, "oh, what have I ever done that such happiness should be given to me; that this world, so dark for others, should be made for me a paradise of sunshine?"

"You have been brave, and true, and noble, Laurence," she answered, drawing back her head so that he might see the proud light of admiration shining in her eyes. "You have been better than other men"

"No, no," he interrupted, stopping with a kiss the torrent of tender praise that flowed from her shyly smiling lips. Then, with his arm about her waist, he led her to a seat, and sat down by her side.

"Geraldine," he began, bending forward so that he might watch the expression of her face, "before you

pledge yourself to me, before I can accept, with a free conscience, the treasure of your love, I must tell you something about myself. With your beauty and wealth you might marry a man very high up in the social scale. Your position is far better than mine, you know. If you marry me the world will say you have stooped too low, have thrown yourself away. Perhaps, even, your father will think that I have entrapped your love—that I am mercenary and presumptuous——"

"Don't be unjust to papa, Laurence," she broke in, smiling. "I have already told him that I love you, and he is glad."

"He is glad!" exclaimed Laurence Gray joyfully. "How good he is! As kind a father as he is a friend. He thinks more of your happiness Geraldine, than of all the wealth and state in the world; it must be so if he allows you even to think of marrying me. But, dearest," he bent his serious face down close to hers, "did he tell you all that he has done for me—how, ever since I was a child, he has helped and protected me?"

The beautiful girl looked up with wondering eyes.

"No," she said slowly, "he has told me nothing of that. But I should like to hear it."

"You shall hear it, darling," returned Laurence resolutely, "you shall hear it now from me. You only know me as I am here in London, as manager in your father's office. But there have been days in Lancashire when have nearly starved. It would not be right for me to marry you—you so dainty, so delicate—without telling you of those days."

"Where is the shame in having been poor?" the girl asked, smiling. "My father was poor, too, when he began life."

"I know, dearest, I never thought there was shame in it. I only want to tell you everything, so that you may know what man it is that you are taking for your husband. You have never seen any but beautiful places open to the sunlight, and made pleasant by wealth. You have no idea of a town where the walls and streets are grimy, and hundreds of high, black chimneys pour forth dense clouds of black smoke that veil the sky.

It was in a place like that that I was born—in Blackburn. My father was a weaver, but I don't remember him very well. He died when I was three years old, leaving my poor mother to support herself and me. She was the handsomest woman I had ever seen until I first saw you. Our Lancashire towns can boast vastly pretty women, in spite of their grime and dirt."

"Have you a picture of your mother, Laurence?" Geraldine asked eagerly.

"Yes, dearest. If you would like to see it, I'll bring it with me the next time I come. But your father could tell you how pretty my mother was before her bitter struggles made her face too sad."

"Oh," cried Geraldine, "did he see her?"

"Yes, he had business in Blackburn, and used often to come there, and somehow—I think it was through the master of our factory—he got to know my mother, and used to help her. She was in delicate health, and could not work much—not always enough to keep us both, and when she was ill, it was your father who kept us from starving. That was when I was too young to work. Afterwards, when I was old enough, I went into the factory. I was a weaver for a long time, and then I rose to be a cut looker. I worked very hard. My darling, although I didn't know it, I was working for you, to bring myself into a position in which I should meet you, and love you, and win you?"

"Did you ever think of love, then Laurence?"

"Yes, dearest. Men and women think of love in all places, and in all classes of life. I thought of it as a great blessing that might one day be mine, and I tried to make myself worthy of it. In the evenings I used to go to the Free Library and read and think: and your father, when he came to Blackburn, brought me books. At last, when I was twenty-three, he got me promoted to be an overseer at the factory. But soon after that my mother died. I was alone in the world."

Geraldine laid her delicate hand on his shoulder.

"Poor Laurence!" she said.

And the tender sympathy in her face made the colour deepen in his handsome one.

"Then your father came to me," he went on, holding her hand captive against his breast "He offered to give me a place in his own office in London There was nothing to keep me in Blackburn any longer, my mother being dead, and I accepted his offer gladly You know how it has been with me since—how I have tried by hard and faithful work to show him some gratitude for his life long kindness to me Dearest, but for his help my mother must have died years before, and I, a poor little orphan boy, would have been left dependent upon public charity Whereas now I have strength and a position, and—oh, greatest of all riches!—you My darling, when I think of how beautiful and how sweet you are all that I am, all that I have, seems as nothing to offer you What can I do to prove to you the greatness of my love? If you will bend down to me, and try to teach me how to go even a little way towards becoming your equal I will worship, be faithful to you always——"

"As I will be faithful to you" she broke in solemnly

He started at the seriousness of her tone

"Geraldine what has changed you so suddenly? You look quite sad"

"It was an old feeling that came over me," she answered, her eyes growing troubled "A presentiment that we should need all our faithfulness—that our love for each other would be put to a terrible and bitter test It can't be so, can it, Laurence? Nothing can come between us now?"

"No—no" He spoke gaily pressing her hand closer against his breast "You must not let such fancies come into your head Why—look, dear!—is not that your father stealing away on tiptoe—there in the conservatory?"

He was right, as her laugh instantly told him The kindly old man had come to take a peep at the lovers from the curtained archway that led from the drawing-room into the conservatory. At the sound of his daughter's recalling voice, he turned and came towards the half embarrassed pair.

"So I'm to have you for a son-in-law, sir? Well,

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well, it's not quite unexpected. You've been a good fellow, and I've long thought of making you a junior partner, and we'll get along famously. I've known you from your childhood, and, after all, I'd sooner trust her with you than with any other man I've met."

"I will deserve your confidence, Mr. Lucas," replied Laurence, in a voice that shook a little with happiness and emotion. "Before God, I will!"

The old merchant looked at him with a glistening eye—looked at them both, and saw how well fitted they were for each other; he so handsome and frank of face, she so fair and sweet.

"Will you play us something, Geraldine?" he asked presently.

She went to the piano and began to play, as requested. But instead of the joy-song, the outburst of melodic gladness that both father and lover had expected, there came from under her graceful fingers a slow mournful refrain, sounds as of subdued wailing that presently rose and swelled into a wild passionate lament, a flood of heart-breaking sorrow. Suddenly, abruptly, the music ceased, and the player burst into tears.

"Geraldine!" exclaimed her father anxiously, "what is this?"

She looked up, dashed aside her tears, and tried to smile.

"I am very foolish, I know," she said apologetically, "but it seemed as if my happiness were too great to last. I tried to play something joyful, but the notes wouldn't come, while those horrible strains of sadness seemed to form themselves under my hands."

"Dearest, you must not imagine such things," said Laurence, with tender reproach. "I could almost say that it is unkind of you so to spoil our first happy hours."

"Poor girl!" smiled Mr. Lucas playfully. "I suspect the excitement of this evening has disturbed her nerves. Too much gladness is sometimes as bad as grief in its effects upon the mind."

Laurence glanced at the clock.

"It is time for me to go," he said regretfully. "But

I must not regret even that. I know I am the happiest man anywhere on earth to-night."

"What it is to be young and in love!" laughed Mr. Lucas.

"By the way," said Laurence, "as I was coming here this evening, I met Ralph Vickers, and he asked to be remembered to you, Geraldine."

"Did he?" cried the old merchant, with an approving nod. "A very worthy young fellow is Vickers—a very worthy young fellow indeed."

"I think so, too," rejoined Laurence. "We get along well together in the office. He's a smart man of business."

"I dislike and mistrust him," interposed Geraldine.

"Do you, dear?" said her father, surprised. "Odd what prejudices women have! Why, I'm sure you oughtn't to dislike him, for he likes you exceedingly well—rather too well for his peace, I think, now that young Gray here has got the better of him with you."

Laurence joined in the old gentleman's laugh.

"I'm sorry for him," he said earnestly. "It must be a very bitter thing to have loved and lost you, Geraldine."

He took her hand to bid her good-night. At this moment Mr. Lucas considerately rose and strolled out of the room.

"Good-night, my darling—my beloved—my queen! There is no word tender enough to express what my heart would call you, Geraldine."

"Good-night," she whispered in return. "This has been the sweetest evening of my life. And yet, somehow, I am afraid—I am afraid—"

"Afraid of what, sweetheart?"

"That there is evil coming to you. I am sure of it. I feel it in the air about me," she said; as she spoke she glanced half-shudderingly round the large, brightly-lighted room.

"Darling, it is nothing." He wondered at her mood. "You are over-excited. You will sleep all those fancies away, and to-morrow we will laugh at them together."

"It may be so," she returned doubtfully. "I pray that it may be so."

"It will be so," he said, with a reassuring smile. "And now, good-night."

"Good-night."

He bent down and laid his lips on hers, clasping her closely the while. For one long, delicious, sacred moment they stood thus. Then he gently freed her, and, with many backward glances, left the room.

Mr. Lucas was waiting for him in the hall.

"Good-night, Laurence," he said, in his kindly hearty voice.

They shook hands, and Laurence Gray then went out.

The night was clear and starlit, and the air on those northern heights of London pure and strong. The night wind blew on his flushed face, cooling it; but no outward cold could lessen the wild fever of rapture that was burning in his heart. Oh, to possess at last the love of the woman he had for so long adored, how sweet it was! His very veins were afire with the joy of it.

He looked up at the stars—those golden scintillating stars, that shone as gloriously over London on this night as ever they could have shone over lovely southern Verona on the night when Romeo waited in the fragrant gardens to speak with Juliet. If, indeed, as men of science said, those myriad shining worlds were peopled, could there be in them all one creature as happy, as blessed as he—Laurence Gray—was now on this lower earth?

He felt there could not be.

He looked before him, and out of the clear deep air Geraldine's face seemed to start—her face, tender, lustrous, radiant with a beauty whose possession a king well might envy. And then he saw in fancy the long sweet years of the future, in which they would be together. How he would work for her! Everything he did, everything he thought, should be consecrated to her service. For her sake his labour in the world should be the best that a man could do. And so he would rise higher and higher, until at last his name should be known and honoured of all men, and she would own that, even in a worldly sense, she had done well to trust to the promise that was in him.

Oh, beautiful face, shining out against the night shadows, leading him on. What could it not spur a man to do—a face like that in his house, at his side for ever?

Suddenly the vision faded, and in its stead a dark form, all too real, all too prosaic, advanced from the gloom towards him. A lantern light flashed in his face.

"I beg your pardon, sir; are you Mr. Laurence Gray?"

Laurence, astonished, stared at the man who accosted him. The light from a neighbouring lamp-post showed him to be an utter stranger.

"Laurence Gray is my name," he answered quietly. "What is it you want with me? I don't know you."

"I daresay not, sir. But you'll find out all about it if you'll just step down to the police-station with us. Jim," he added, turning to a man who stood behind in the shadow. "It's all right. Come on."

Laurence Gray drew back half-angrily

"Why should I go with you? There is some mistake here," he cried.

"No mistake at all, sir," retorted the stranger dryly. "We've been looking for you all the evening. And we're two of us, so it's no good your making any resistance."

"I shall not attempt to resist you, if it comes to that," rejoined Laurence quietly. "But I think that before I go with you I have a right to understand what authority you have for interfering with me."

"You'll learn that soon enough," said the man who had accosted him. "Come on, and no more parleying. We can't stand here talking all night."

Laurence reflected,

"Very well," he decided presently. "I'll come. Fortunately it is not far from here to the station, and the sooner I go with you, the sooner this mystery will be cleared up."

They were then at the top of the Hampstead High Street, and ten o'clock was striking from the church clock close by.

Laurence Gray hastened his pace. The two men

walked on either side of him. Within a few minutes the police-station was reached.

"Now," said Laurence, when they had entered it, "what am I wanted for?"

One of the men answered grimly:

"You are arrested."

"Arrested! For what? On what charge?"

The answer came as grimly as before:

"Wilful murder."

"*Murder!*" Laurence echoed the word in startled horror.

"Yes," said the second man, who had not before spoken. "Here's the warrant for your arrest. You are arrested on suspicion of having wilfully murdered Charles Kesteven.

CHAPTER III

THE GOSPEL OAK TRAGEDY

WITH a firm step Laurence Gray entered the prisoner's dock in the sombre hall of the Central Criminal Court, indicted for the wilful murder of Charles Kesteven. He pleaded "Not Guilty"

The few weeks that had passed since the night of his arrest in Hampstead—that all too happy night of his bethrothal to the beautiful Miss Lucas—had been to him as years of painful anguish The reading of the warrant—to him so incomprehensible—at the very moment when his joy was at its fullest; his first weary night in custody; his removal in the dismal prison-van from the police-station to the court in which was held the inquest on the body of the man he was presumed to have killed, and his transference thence to the gloomy old House of Detention, all appeared as a horrible dream. Next had come the tedium and the more public disgrace of the magisterial inquiry. He had felt confident that the evidence given at this inquiry would substantiate his innocence, and bring about his discharge. After the blow of the verdict of wilful

murder here returned against him, he had been consigned to a thick-walled cell in Newgate, where the long dreary days and nights, filled with harrowing doubts and anxieties concerning the result of his trial, had been as terrible to endure as any bodily torture.

But the crucial hour had come at last. He stood before the tribunal of his fellow-countrymen, and conscious of his absolute guiltlessness, and innocence, of the horrible crime with which he was charged, he felt certain that the truth must now inevitably be made known, and that very soon he would again lift his head proudly among men—scatheless, stainless, and free.

He looked straight before him at the judge, keenly, unwaveringly. His lordship was a broad-shouldered, comfortable man, whose judicial wig covered a full round head, and whose ruddy countenance appeared to be that of a kindly, well-to-do country gentleman. Laurence Gray read leniency in the blue eyes that surveyed him from over a pair of gold-rimmed eye-glasses, and his hope rose higher. His estimate of the twelve jurymen, who sat in a double row at his left, was less rapidly made. The foreman was a black-browed furrier of Cheapside, whose severe aspect was not encouraging.

From the jury he looked into the body of the court at the numerous gentlemen in wigs, busily conning their briefs, or sitting with heads together whispering. In the reporters' bench, directly opposite the jury box, sat a pinch-nosed, grey-haired veteran, calmly inserting his sheets of carbon paper between the leaves of his blank "flimsies."

The prisoner was himself the centre towards which all other eyes were directed. From the little gallery above his head a wave of whisper reached him, as those of the public who had succeeded in gaining admission leaned over the rail, that they might see at least the curly brown hair and the candid white forehead of the man whose life, perhaps, depended upon the issue of that day's trial.

Wearing the same neat frock-coat and dark check trousers that he had worn on the night when he had

paid his last visit to the home of the woman he loved, he still looked the honest and handsome Lancashire lad of whom his beloved had said :

"You have been brave and true, Laurence. You have been better than other men."

But his cheeks were thinner and paler now than they had been in that hour of his supreme joy, and his clear brown eyes had lost some of their lustre.

But they regained it for a moment when he saw his betrothed enter the court, conducted by his own solicitor. Eagerly he scanned her face as she turned it towards him. It was pale, but its pallor hardly lessened her uncommon loveliness, making her sorrowful eyes look larger and more luminous even than their wont. The gaze of the whole court was upon her, as, wrapped in a long fur-trimmed grey velvet cloak, she passed to her seat behind the jury box. Laurence felt his heart beat quicker as he watched her. She had not changed towards him. Even across the distance those tender eyes of hers told him she trusted him and bade him have no fear.

The leading counsel for the prosecution—a tall man, whose black beard contrasted strangely with his white wig—rose to open the case for the Crown. A deep silence, broken only by the speaker's sonorous voice, and the scratching of many pens, fell upon the court.

He said that the prisoner was charged with the wilful murder of Charles Kesteven on the evening of Wednesday, February 15th. He thought, he said, that the evidence would very clearly show that the murder, by whomsoever committed, had been a premeditated one, and the circumstances under which the crime had been perpetrated would in evidence clearly connect themselves with the prisoner.

The deceased gentleman, who was forty-five years of age, was a respected and prosperous accountant, having offices in the City of London, and living in a suburban villa of his own in Hampstead. Evidence would be adduced proving that in the course of his professional work he had been engaged for the two or three days prior to the time of his murder in auditing

the commercial accounts of Messrs. Christopher Lucas and Co., of which well-known firm the prisoner was the business manager. In this connection it would be shown that the prisoner had a very distinct motive for arresting the completion of that audit. He was in love with the daughter of his employer. On the very evening of the murder he was present at a ball at Fenton Court, the residence of Mr. Christopher Lucas in Hampstead. On the night of his arrest he had asked for the hand of his master's daughter in marriage. It was, therefore, to his personal interest that the condition of the accounts under his charge should not be discovered. Even had the present proceedings been uncalled for, it was probable that the prisoner would have been brought up charged with a different crime.

Coming to the murder itself, counsel stated that the deceased, on the evening on which he met his death, quitted his office at an unusually early hour, leaving the City by the North London train, which started from Broad Street Station at 4 27. The carriage in which he travelled was a first-class one, and on arriving at Gospel Oak, twenty minutes afterwards, it contained three occupants—Angus Macintyre, who would be called as a witness, Charles Kesteven himself, and the prisoner. Macintyre who resided in Highgate had alighted from the train at Gospel Oak Station. The night was foggy.

Here the learned counsel paused, and looked fixedly at Laurence Gray. Then, drawing up his silk gown about his shoulders, and placing his right hand upon his open brief, he continued:

"At the next station—namely, Hampstead Heath, which was reached at 4.52, the train being three minutes late—the prisoner was seen hurriedly leaving the platform. Ten minutes afterwards he was at his lodgings in Well Lane. Again, three hours later, he appeared at the ball at Fenton Court. The footboard of the railway carriage he had so hurriedly left was found to be spattered with blood. In the carriage itself there were more blood-stains, also a gold cuff-link. The cuff-link will be identified as having belonged to the deceased.

"In the meanwhile, Charles Kesteven, who had bee

invited to the ball at Fenton Court, did not arrive. His family, believing him to have gone to the ball straight from town, were not alarmed by the fact that he had not returned home before midnight. But on discovering that his evening dress clothes had not been removed from the drawer of his wardrobe, they caused inquiries to be made. On the following morning, the fog having cleared, his dead body was found lying on the embankment of the down line, midway between the stations of Gospel Oak and Hampstead Heath. In his breast, penetrating the left lung, there was a very formidable long-bladed dagger.

"That dagger would be identified as the property of the prisoner.

"When arrested, the prisoner steadfastly denied all knowledge of the crime. It remained for the jury to consider the evidence, which would now be set before them, and so give their verdict accordingly."

Laurence Gray stepped back in the dock once again, utterly amazed at the array of startling, apparently conclusive facts that had been so dexterously marshalled against him. He sank into a chair that stood near him. His brain whirled in its perplexity He looked across at Geraldine. What did she think now?

As the first witness for the prosecution was called, he again stood up. He read no sympathy now in the eyes of the spectators, but only cold, unpitying curiosity.

The veteran reporter laid down his writing-style, and turned to his companion of the *Fleet Street Gazette*.

"How was it you didn't turn up last night at the Cheshire Cheese, Jack?" he said.

"Too busy," was the reply. "I had to go across and do that bloomin' fire in the Old Kent Road. Wrote a full column, and then blest if the sub-editor didn't cut it down to a two-inch par!"

"Ay, it's always the way. Well"—when the witness had been sworn—"at it again"

The first witness stated that he was the head clerk in the office of the deceased accountant Until after his master's death he had taken no part in auditing the books of Messrs. Christopher Lucas and Co. But he under-

stood that in going over the accounts Mr. Kesteven had discovered some serious discrepancies. There was a total deficiency to the amount of £758; the last embezzlement had occurred on December 3rd, and was to the extent of £224. Mr. Kesteven had at once communicated these facts to the prisoner, who, as manager of Mr. Lucas's firm, might, he believed, be able to explain the matter.

"Had all the books been examined when that communication was made?" asked the counsel.

"No. Those of the manager himself had not yet been seen. They were stated to be in constant use, and could not then be removed. On the afternoon of February 15th—the date of the murder—the prisoner came to our office and had an interview with my master. What took place between them I do not know. But I heard the prisoner protesting."

"What did he say? Give his exact words as you remember them."

"He said: 'It is impossible, Kesteven. You must have made some oversight. You can't surely, imagine that there has been an embezzlement?' Then the deceased said: 'That's exactly what I do imagine, Mr. Gray. And when I see the other books, I think I shall be able to put my finger on the guilty party.'"

"What followed after that?"

"The prisoner and the deceased went out. I heard the prisoner mention something about talking it over in the train."

"You swear to that?"

"I do."

The witness went on to say that after the death of his master he had received instructions from Mr. Lucas to continue the examination of the books. Three days afterwards, he made his full statement of the accounts, showing that the defalcations occurred in the books which had been kept by the prisoner. There were marks of erasure in several instances in the money columns. Certain figures had been altered, with entries which did not appear in the other books.

The books in question were produced in court for the

inspection of his lordship and the jury, who appeared to agree as to the correctness of the witness's statements.

Mr. Christopher Lucas was then called.

"I have known the prisoner," he said, "since he was a mere child. I trusted him as I would have trusted a son. I never suspected him of any wrong-doing. Indeed, so greatly did I honour his integrity, that on the evening of February 16th last, in consenting to his marriage with my daughter, I also promised to make him a partner in my business. Until the events occurred which have led to this trial, I knew absolutely nothing against him."

"Then these events have altered your opinion regarding the prisoner?"

"With regard to the alleged embezzlements perhaps."

"If you had known of them earlier, would you have permitted his engagement to your daughter?"

"I should have hesitated without proof of his innocence."

"Are you satisfied that the embezzlements referred to were the act of the prisoner?"

Mr. Lucas turned his eyes in the direction of the dock. Laurence Gray met them unflinchingly. But the facts were against him.

"I regret to say that, since examining the books, that is my impression."

The accused man recoiled with an exclamation of dismay.

"On the evening of the ball at your house, or on the evening following that one, did you observe anything unusual in the prisoner's demeanour?"

"Nothing beyond the very natural excitement of mind which a young man may be expected to exhibit on being accepted by the woman he loves. In other respects he was exactly as I had always known him to be."

"On that second evening did the prisoner mention anything in your presence concerning the finding of the body of the deceased?"

"It was mentioned for an instant; but as my daughter was present I did not wish the subject to be pursued."

Angus Macintyre was the next witness examined.

"On the afternoon in question," he said, with a distinctly northern accent, "I startit from Broad Street by the twenty-seeven meenits past four train. In the same carriage were two ither passengers, who got oot at Camden Toon. From Camden Toon to Gospel Oak there were the deceased gentleman, the preesoner, and mysel'. I took nae notice of what they were speakin' aboot, but that it was something of their accoonts that had gone agley. There was naething that might lead a body to suppose that there was any ill will between them. They sat in opposeete corners at the platform side of the compartment"

"You swear that the prisoner was the man you saw?"

"Yes He sat with his back to the engine. The night was just as foggy as it could be and I was in a hurry to get oot at Gospel Oak, for my man Geordie was waitin' me with the machine, and your London fogs are good for neither body nor beast"

"The machine? What's that?"

"I believe that is a Scotticism—meaning his carriage," observed the judge.

The learned counsel acknowledged the information with a bow, and continued his examination.

"You identified the body of the deceased at the time of the coroner's inquest, I think, and recognised it as that of the man who had sat in the same carriage with yourself and the prisoner?"

"Exactly. Yes"

"In alighting from the train you had to pass between them?"

"Yes."

"Leaving them both in their seats?"

"To the best of my belief, but I did not turn to observe if either of them alighted."

Here Laurence Gray leaned forward as if about to speak. A glance from his solicitor restrained him.

"This is an important point," said the counsel. "Do you swear that the prisoner did not get out at Gospel Oak?"

"I cannot swear to what I do not know. I was one of the first to step upon the platform when the

train stopped, and, the first-class carriages being in the middle of the train, the pass-gate was immediately opposeete me. I was not on the platform mote than aboot half a meenit."

A ticket-collector was then examined, and he stated that, on the Wednesday in question, at 4 52 p.m., the prisoner, who was a season ticket holder, passed him at the barrier at Hampstead Heath Station. He appeared to be in a great hurry. The witness would probably not have noticed him on that evening but for the fact that the prisoner had arrived by an earlier train than was usual with him. He knew the prisoner well, as he had frequently received tips from him.

The superintendent of the police-station, who had taken charge on the night of Laurence Gray's arrest, gave evidence to the effect that on asking the prisoner a few questions relative to the murder of which he was accused, the prisoner had stated emphatically that he had left the deceased alive and well in the railway carriage at Gospel Oak Station, and that his own purpose in leaving the carriage was to look in one of the other compartments for a friend whom he believed to be in that same train. Not finding him before the train started, he had jumped into a second-class carriage as the train began to move.

The same witness, in continuing his evidence, stated that in searching the prisoner he had found in the inside pocket of his overcoat a fragment of a white silk neckcloth. The neckcloth was stained with blood. At the sight of this article the prisoner had paled. He declared that he knew nothing about it, but refused to make any further explanations.

The fragment of silk was produced in court. The judge and jury examined it, and shook their heads wisely. It was identified by the next witness, the widow of the deceased, and, together with the cuff-link that had been found in the railway carriage, it was declared by her to be the property of her late husband. The neckcloth from which the fragment had been torn had not been found.

Four other witnesses for the prosecution remained

yet to be examined. These were a platelayer, who had discovered the body of the murdered man; the surgeon who had made the post-mortem examination; a railway official, who deposed to having seen the blood upon the carriage footboard; and an office-boy.

The deceased had been found on the morning after the murder lying at the bottom of the railway embankment, midway between the two stations. The body was much shattered by the fall from the train. Sticking in the breast there was a large knife, the blade penetrating the left lung. The weapon was produced. It was observed that Laurence Gray was strangely agitated at the sight of it. He looked astonished, perplexed.

James Stinchcombe, an office-boy in the employ of Mr. Christopher Lucas, was then called.

The examining counsel asked him to describe the desk in the private office of the prisoner.

"'Twere a meyorginy desk, sir," said the boy, "with twisty-twirly legs, and a shiny top wot yer could see yer faice in. There were a hink-pot and ever so many pens and sealin'-waxes, and a paiper-knife."

"Can you describe the paper-knife?"

"Yas; 'tweren't a hordinary paiper-knife, though Mr. Gray he used it as sich. If ye arst me, it were one of them thore knives wot yer read of in 'Dare-devil Dick, or the Boy Chief of the Rocky Mountains.' *You* know, sir, don't yer?"

"Perhaps the witness means a bowie-knife," remarked the learned judge.

"Yas," said the witness; "right you are, sir; a bowie-knife. And Mr. Gray he ses to me one arternoon: 'James,' ses he, 'yer take a great hinteres' in that 'ere knife of mine, it seems.' 'Yas,' says I; 'it's a scalpin' knife, ain't it, sir? Leastways, it might be, on'y it ain't 'arf shorp enough.' So 'e told me as 'tweren't that at all, but on'y a sham 'un as 'ad bin used in a theayter."

"Would you recognise the knife if you saw it?"

"Arst yerself the question! Didn't I 'ave it in my 'and every mornin' w'en I were a dustin' of the desk?"

The weapon was then handed to the witness, who took it in his hand and turned it over.

"That's the very knife," said he. Then in surprise: "W'y, some chap's bin a-sharpenin' of it!"

"You swear to the fact that it was not in its present state when you last saw it?"

"That I do; for the last time I seen it were on the day before the murder, w'en Mr. Vickers were in the manager's office. Mr. Vickers, 'e were talkin' to Mr. Gray about a letter as I were to take to the accountant's. And as 'e stood by the desk 'e 'eld the knife in 'is two 'ands, and were a-resting of 'is chin on the 'andle. The point of the knife were on the morginy desk. Thinks I: 'It's a good thing as the point of that 'ere knife 'ain't sharper, or it would cut a scratch on the desk, and oo'd git the blime fer damagin' of the guv'nor's property. W'y, *I* would.'"

"When did you miss this knife from its usual place on the prisoner's desk?"

"On the Wednesday arternoon, w'en I were puttin' away Mr. Gray's ledgers. Mr. Vickers were in the room at the time, copying of a reference in the day-book. I told 'im as the knife were gone, and ses 'e: 'All right, James; no doubt Mr. Gray knows w'ere it is. Look smart and put his books away. He's goin' out to a party to-night, and 'e'll be leavin' early. Get the place cleared before 'e comes in.'"

"The prisoner was then out at the accountant's, you say? At what time did he return?"

"About four o'clock. Mr. Kesteven were with 'im and they went away together. I didn't say anythin' more about the knife bein' missin', and Mr. Vickers w'en 'e went out a bit arter, 'e told me not to bother myself."

"Did you see Mr. Vickers in the office again that evening?"

"Yes. 'E were kept busy on the Exchange that arternoon, an' when 'e came back 'e 'ad some letters to write. 'E didn't gi' me the keys till near eight o'clock. Then I carried 'is portmantle to 'is club, w'ere 'e went to dress for the ball at the guvernor's—at Mr. Lucas's 'ouse."

This concluded the case for the prosecution, and the Court adjourned. Laurence Gray was then conducted to his cell.

"Well, Jack, how's this affair going to end?" remarked the veteran reporter, gathering up his papers.

"Guilty, of course,' said the representative of the *Fleet Street Gazette*

"Not a bit of it my boy. I've seen more murder trials than any man in London. I lay Gray's as innocent as you or me He'll be acquitted."

CHAPTER IV

THE BLACK CAP

On the following morning Laurence Gray entered the dock less firmly than he had done on the first day of the trial. The nature of the evidence, so directly against him in its connecting chains of circumstance, had appalled him. His haggard face betrayed the anxiety that he had endured in the seclusion of his cell. He looked round the court, and swiftly brought his eyes to bear upon the seat that Geraldine Lucas had occupied on the previous day. She was there, looking paler and more troubled, but her soft, violet eyes met his own with brave, true love shining in them. A thrill of joy passed through him She, at least, did not doubt him. In the gladness of this knowledge the fear that had oppressed him passed wholly away.

The leading counsel for the defence opened his case with a few introductory words, and his first witness was called.

This was Laurence Gray's landlady, Mrs. Howarth, a homely, sweet-faced woman of middle age, who, having been sworn, turned to look at Laurence with an expression of motherly pity.

She gave evidence to the effect that the prisoner had occupied rooms in her house in Well Lane, Hampstead, for five years; that he had regularly paid his rent and that he was of very steady habits. On the evening

of Wednesday, February 15th, he had come home, as in the morning he had said he would do, at a few minutes after five o'clock. He used his latch-key in entering, and went straight to his bedroom. Knowing that he was going to Fenton Court that night, she had asked him, as he passed through the hall, if he would have hot water upstairs. He said, "No, thank you, Mrs. Howarth. I'll have a cup of tea presently, and dress afterwards."

"Was there any unsteadiness in his voice when he spoke to you?"

"None whatever."

"Was he in any way excited or nervous—flurried?"

"No. I gave him a letter that had come by post. In taking it his hand was perfectly steady. It was the same afterwards when he was taking his tea."

Geraldine looked gratefully at Mrs. Howarth, but waited anxiously for the next question.

"You swear that he bore no outward signs of having been in a struggle?"

"I do."

"When he had dressed and gone out, did you enter his room?"

"I did. And I saw by the various tokens that he had not been too nervous to shave himself."

"Did you see any blood-marks about the clothes or linen he had taken off?"

"None."

"Now, as to the prisoner's financial condition. Did it, at any time, appear to you that he was in money difficulties?"

"On the contrary, he was, I believe, in receipt of an excellent salary, and that he always had plenty of money was proved to me in many ways."

"Give me an instance, please."

"At the end of last year he started my son in business, lending him the money that he needed."

A juryman here asked for the exact date of this transaction and the amount of the sum advanced.

"Mr. Gray gave my son a cheque for two hundred pounds on December 5th."

The jurymen and several of the barristers made a note of this; the defending counsel bit his lips. After some cross examination, the witness was dismissed.

Ralph Vickers was then called. Laurence Gray drew closer to the bars of the dock, trying to meet the witness's eyes. Geraldine Lucas moved restlessly in her seat, and seemed to await the next piece of evidence with considerable nervousness.

Ralph Vickers was a man of about nine-and-twenty, handsome, beyond a doubt, with a well-trimmed black beard, and large dark eyes of a somewhat languid expression. His nose was of that Grecian type that sculptors give to their antique gods. His well-knit figure was revealed under this tight-fitting overcoat. His hands, as he raised the book to his lips in taking the oath, were long rather than broad.

"You were present," said the examining counsel, after some introductory questions had been replied to —"you were a guest at Fenton Court on the night of February 15th? At what time did you arrive there?"

"Between nine and ten o'clock."

"Did you go home to dress after leaving the city on that evening."

"No; I dressed at my club in Lombard Street."

"At what time did you leave your office?"

"At about a quarter to eight."

"At what time did the prisoner leave?"

"As near as possible, four o'clock."

Counsel hesitated. Ralph Vickers raised his eyes, and slowly turned them towards the dock. At sight of Laurence Gray he grew suddenly nervous. He thrust his trembling hands into his overcoat pockets.

"My God!" he said to himself, "what will the next question be? How shall I answer it?"

A buzzing sound seemed to fill his ears.

"What were your movements during that interval?"

The witness grew visibly paler, but, nevertheless, answered in a steady voice:

"From half-past four to six o'clock I was occupied at the Exchange. At six I returned to the office, and wrote letters until nearly eight."

This false *alibi* passed unquestioned.

Vickers was then asked to identify the knife. He did not touch it, but simply looked at it hurriedly as it was held near him in the hands of a court official. He swore to its being the knife that Laurence Gray was accustomed to use as a paper-cutter, and stated that he had first noticed its absence from the desk on his attention being drawn to that fact by the office boy.

"You swear that it was not taken up by the prisoner immediately before he left the office?"

"Yes. I observed that it was missing before he came in from calling upon the accountant."

At the next question Ralph Vickers breathed more freely. The one fatal point that would have made all the difference in the result of the trial was passed over. Had he been cross-questioned as to his own whereabouts between a quarter-past four and six o'clock, the jury would probably have arrived at a very different verdict. But the defending counsel was more eager to prove Laurence Gray innocent than to seek to discover the man who was really guilty.

Questions relating to what took place at Fenton Court elicited evidence that was neither favourable nor unfavourable to the accused man.

As to the manner of the embezzlement, Ralph Vickers was inwardly assured that suspicion was already well fixed upon the rival whom he hated. His own books had, happily for himself, been skilfully enough manipulated. He had, so far, cleverly succeeded in escaping all suspicion, and, knowing that Geraldine Lucas was in court, he adroitly saved himself from her possible displeasure by appearing to defend her accepted but unfortunate lover, while admitting nothing that might either incriminate himself or palliate the apparent guilt of Laurence Gray.

The counsel for the prosecution, in summing up the evidence, contended that a strong motive had been shown for the commission of the crime by the prisoner. It had been shown that the accused had practised for many months a system of embezzlement. To cover his numerous defalcations, and in order that their

discovery might not destroy his chance of winning his master's daughter, he had cooked his accounts. Finding that his false entries could not escape the lynx eye of the deceased—who was admitted to be one of the most expert accountants in the metropolis—he had endeavoured to arrest the discovery of one crime by committing a much darker one.

It had been clearly proved that the fatal weapon was one which was well known to belong to him. He had been seen in the railway carriage alone with his victim, at the station beyond which the murder was committed. He had also been seen leaving the station most immediately contiguous to the scene of the crime. More convincing than all this, a blood-stained fragment of his victim's neckcloth had been found in his overcoat pocket. The evidence which had been adduced pointed to one conclusion only—namely, that the prisoner was the person who had perpetrated the crime.

The counsel for the defence then addressed the jury. He pointed out that what they had to consider was whether the chain of circumstantial evidence in this case was sufficiently strong to justify them in coming to a conclusion adverse to the prisoner. Reviewing the evidence, he said that there were material discrepancies warranting their pausing before returning a verdict of "Guil y" He argued that it had not been clearly proved tl a the weapon had been taken from the office by the prisoner, no witness had shown that the prisoner had been seen with that weapon in his possession outside of his office on the day in question. The evidence of Angus Macintyre as to the accused travelling beyond Gospel Oak in company with the deceased was purely negative, and negative evidence was not conclusive. He laid great stress upon the prisoner's emphatic assertion before the police superintendent that he had changed carriages at Gospel Oak. Who could say that no other person had entered in his place into the carriage with the deceased? The absence of all signs of the prisoner having engaged in such a physical struggle, as must have been necessary, before the deceased could have been stabbed and his

body been thrown out of the carriage, was strongly in his favour.

On arrival at his home, within twelve minutes of the murder, the prisoner was calm, unruffled, steady of hand. And could they, for a moment, believe that a man of such gentle and sincere aspect as the prisoner at the bar could go almost red-handed from such a deed and offer himself in marriage to the beautiful woman he loved, the woman whose father—who was also his own benefactor—he is alleged to have systematically robbed? The assumption was monstrous!

As to the motive for the crime imputed to the prisoner, was it at all likely that any man would, as hinted by the prosecution, rob his master of £200, for no selfish reason, but in order to launch the son of his landlady in business? The idea was ridiculous.

The correspondence of the date of the last embezzlement with that of the loan to the landlady's son was a mere coincidence. In the second place, was it at all probable that, having manipulated his accounts, he would brutally take the life of the accountant, who, as far as he knew, had not definitely traced the defalcations to their source? If the prisoner was indeed guilty of these embezzlements, where was the reason in his first manipulating his accounts and then murdering the accountant before those manipulations had stood the test of the accountant's scrutiny?

Counsel pointed out to the jury the danger of relying, in a case like that, upon circumstantial evidence entirely, and to pause before they came to the decision that the prisoner's was the hand which took the murdered man's life. If they entertained any doubt as to whether he was, either by himself, or with others, a party to the murder, they ought to acquit him.

The judge, having summed up the evidence and reviewed it in all its details, entreated the jury not to found their verdict upon speculative theories and visionary ideas, but to test, and try, and weigh—and accurately weigh—every particle of the evidence—real, solid, cogent evidence—before they came to a verdict antagonistic to this man.

The jury then retired, and were absent for half an hour. In that interval, Geraldine Lucas, her heart beating furiously in its terrible suspense, crept down from her seat, and, almost unobserved by anyone other than Laurence Gray, stood close underneath the dock. She heard the jury return to their seats; she heard the Clerk of Arraigns ask if they had agreed upon their verdict; and then, as though a knife had pierced her heart, she started back with the terrible words ringing in her ears:

"We find him *guilty!*"

Then, when the judge had asked Laurence Gray the usual question as to whether he had anything to say why sentence should not be passed upon him, she heard the voice of her lover sounding clear and resolute as he held up his hand:

"I am innocent. Before God I declare that I am innocent!"

The judge placed upon his head a little square piece of black velvet, and, with a solemn voice, and amid the awful silence of the court, he said:

"Laurence Gray, you have been found guilty, after a most patient trial, and a most able defence, and I must say that I feel it to be absolutely impossible to conceive that the death of Charles Kesteven would have taken place without your having been an active instrument towards that death. I do not wish to add to the pangs which you must feel by saying much to you, but I cannot hold out to you any hope whatever that within a very short time you will not cease to live as an inmate of this our world. You will have a certain time for preparation. God grant that you may use that time for your eternal welfare. You will be kindly dealt with and kindly ministered to; and I trust you will use your short time upon earth in preparing yourself for another world. The sentence of the Court is that you shall be taken from the place where you now are to the place of your execution, and hanged by the neck until you are dead; and God have mercy on your soul!"

Geraldine Lucas gave a piteous cry, and rapidly stepped towards the bar of the dock, stretching her trembling hands towards her lover, and looking up into

his agonised face. Laurence bent over and caught her hands convulsively.

"Laurence, dear Laurence," she cried, passionately pressing her lips to his fingers, "I do not doubt your innocence. Though all men be against you—though all the world be against you—my heart will be true to you still!"

CHAPTER V

IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH

DAZED, with a sudden numbness of the brain that in that first hour of horror saved him perhaps from madness, Laurence Gray was conducted back to his cell in Newgate prison. It was not the same cell as that which he had hitherto occupied, but one on a higher storey.

In all other respects it exactly resembled the old one. There were the same white-washed walls, flawlessly clean, the same bright-polished, asphalt floor, the same shelves, small flap-table and solitary wooden stool. Above all, there was the same intense cold. In this bitter winter weather those bare walls and asphalt floor struck a deathly chill even into the hot full veins of youth.

It was the cold that first roused Laurence Gray from the torpor into which he had fallen. Memory awoke in him, and with that awakening came an anguish that made him insensible to all bodily discomforts, fixing his whole soul on one horrible thought; he was a condemned man!

Condemned—doomed to die ignominiously at the gallows for a crime that he had not committed! to perish in his bright youth, in the fulness of his joy, in that supremest time of blessedness when love smiled on him, and the future seemed opening before him in a dazzling glory of golden light!

He groaned aloud in his great agony. Surely no criminal, no red-handed murderer justly cut off from life, had ever lost so much as he, an innocent man, was losing now.

And she, Geraldine, his beloved, whose loyal heart had not been afraid to show its loyalty when all others turned away, what suffering, what reflected dishonour her love for him had brought upon her! She had said she would be true. Great Heavens! true to what? In a little while he would be dead. Would she, dared she, be true to the memory of one branded as a criminal, a man hanged for murder?

His limbs quivered, his brain seemed filled with fire. For a moment he felt that madness was surely coming upon him; and to calm himself, to get relief, he began to pace the narrow cell. To and fro, like a caged animal, he strode, with his hands locked convulsively. His handsome face was distorted in his despair. His eyes were wild, and a cold perspiration beaded his forehead and damped his thick brown hair.

"Geraldine, Geraldine!" he murmured to himself at times. And then again imploringly, as if his beloved could help him, "Geraldine!"

Oh, bitterest of all, bitterer even than coming death was it that she—she for whose sake he would have striven to be the noblest man on earth—should see him thus abased, thus powerless to clear himself from the cloud of shame that had fallen upon him! She believed in his innocence now while her love was strong, while yet the seal of his betrothal kiss lingered upon her lips; but by and by, when he was dead, when his body had the courtyard of the gaol for its infamous sepulchre, would she believe in him then?

A low deep cry broke from him as he paced. He stopped suddenly, sat down on the wooden stool, and, hiding his face in his hands, burst into tearless sobs.

He sat there so for hours. At last the door of his cell opened, and a warder asked if he required anything. Prisoners under sentence of death are not allowed luxurious diet, but a certain laxity is permitted. Laurence replied that he wanted nothing. The warder retired, but presently returned bringing some food, which the prisoner might eat or leave, as he chose. Laurence was then told to make his bed, and given instructions how to do it; after which he was left alone

for the night. Unknown to him, however, the eye of the warder was frequently upon him through the wire-gauze spy-hole in the door.

He did not go to bed. The whole night through he paced his cell, save when in moments of extreme exhaustion he sank down for a while on the little stool.

In those quiet hours the noises of the street traffic came up to him; gradually the muffled murmur grew duller and duller with advancing lateness, until at last it almost died away. Oh, that murmur of the streets, unheeded by free men, how living, how fresh it is to those for whom crime or misfortune has made liberty and right to tread those stones as far away and unattainable as the inmost heart of Africa or the yet undiscovered pole!

The hours of the long, bitterly cold night were marked by the bells of St Paul's and St Sepulchre. Painfully, terribly distinct they sounded in Laurence Gray's ears.

Their iron tones rang harshly in the deep stillness, solemn as strokes of doom. Laurence shuddered as he crossed the ice-cold asphalt, or sat half frozen on the stool.

Twice the door of his cell was opened, and the flash of a warder's lantern illumined the darkness. He could not hear whether the warder went away along the gallery, or whether he remained outside the door, for the official on night duty wore slippers that were noiseless as the stealthy foot of a cat.

At last the clanging of a great bell proclaimed that it was time to rise. For Laurence no summons was needed since he had not been to bed. Haggard, exhausted, well-nigh insane in his overwhelming despair, he sat with his head buried in his hands, and his limbs numb with the intense cold. Breakfast was served to him, but he took no heed. He wanted neither food nor drink. He was disturbed at last by the entrance of a warder, who peremptorily ordered him to prepare for chapel.

Mindless, feelingless as an automaton, he was marched into the large hall where stands the glass consulting-room that presently—could he have foreseen it—was to be the scene of a new birth of peace in his oppressed heart.

From here he was taken up a dark winding stairway

to the chapel, which was a large room, square and high. It had two large divisions, shut off with iron bars, like immense cages, in one of which were fifteen or sixteen cropped and shaven prisoners who had been tried and sentenced, and were waiting to be drafted off to the various convict prisons at which they were to serve out their sentences. The other barred-off space contained those who were committed for trial, while prisoners who were merely remanded sat on open benches between.

Laurence Gray was conducted by his warder to a chair immediately below the pulpit, the distinctive seat of prisoners waiting death. The warder sat on another chair beside him.

How true, how vivid were the words of prayer resounding in that assemblage of the vicious and the broken-hearted! How vivid above all to the one among them before whose eyes the phantom of approaching death stood menacing and ghastly! They fell like balm on his despairing heart, lifting up his strength, bidding him prove himself worthy of his manhood, worthy of the conscious innocence that should make his steps to the scaffold as fearless and firm as if they had led him to the marriage altar. Geraldine, too, would wish him to be brave. No man who was not brave was worthy of her pure strong love, her noble constancy.

When he left the chapel after service was ended, his natural spirit had revived, and although the shadow was not lifted from him, and his agony of mind was not less keen, yet he walked with his head erect and his features calm, as a man should, who knows that within himself there is no guilt.

An hour or two later he was summoned from his cell to see a visitor who, he was told, had obtained by order the privilege of an interview with him in the glass-room—where he had already held consultations with his solicitor—instead of at the more public grating.

His heart gave a great bound. Could it be Geraldine? It was she, lovely as ever, but white and frail as a lily, with the brown circles of grief and sleeplessness beneath her heavenly eyes. For a moment he swayed

in his walk, overcome by love and shame and joy together. Then he rushed to her, and caught her outstretched hands convulsively.

They stood thus for some moments, looking at each other, but speechless with emotion. Besides, looks were safer there than words, for the door of the glass-room was open, and warders were stationed outside, not only to keep them in sight, but also to hear what they said. Yet words came at last. It was Laurence who spoke first.

"Oh, my darling, my darling! Heaven bless you for coming to me!"

And she, who had been scanning his dear face, noting its pallor and the lines that told of terrible, unspeakable suffering, answered passionately:

"Did you think I should not come? Did you think I believed in you less? Laurence! if an angel came to me and told me you were guilty, I would not believe it."

"Geraldine!" his voice trembled, "if I have in any way deserved this shame and sorrow, it must be by having been too happy. Just to have been loved by you is joy enough for one man's life. It was wrong in me to expect more."

"Ah, but you will have more," she cried eagerly, trying to make herself believe in what she said. "You must be brave, be hopeful."

"I will be brave," Laurence said solemnly, looking down tenderly into her tearful eyes. "I promise you that, my own, my dearest. But I cannot be hopeful. In a very little while now I shall be dead."

She burst into passionate sobs.

"No, no! God will not let it be."

"It will be," he returned quietly. "We cannot tell how it was that circumstances were against me so, but they were against me blackly, and the sentence has gone forth. We cannot fight against the law." And then he took her hands again and bent his face nearer to hers. "Geraldine, tell me, will you love my name, my memory, after I am gone, even though I—oh, Heaven! how shall I say it?—even though I

have died a criminal's death? Other people will not believe me innocent. They will say I have disgraced you, have wilfully mixed up your spotless name with the blackness of my guilt. Will you be able to hear all that, and not wish that you had never seen me?"

With an effort she calmed herself sufficiently to speak. Her eyes, dimmed now, looked up with all her heart shining through them.

"Laurence," she said gravely, "if I could I would walk by your side as you go to the scaffold, and there, before all those present, I would say, 'I love him,' and I would say it with pride. But you will not die; you shall not! Something will happen; the true criminal will be discovered. Whoever he is, he will confess; he will not let an innocent man die."

"It is too late," Laurence answered gently, shaking his head. "If he had meant to confess, he would have done so before now. No, Geraldine, this is the last time."

He felt her hand trembling in his. Her eyes had a wild look of anguish.

"Geraldine," he murmured, "I was a coward last night; I gave way weakly, like a child. But I have done with cowardice now; for your sake I am going to be brave; and, darling, you must be brave for mine. Hereafter, in the other world, I shall have no shame. I shall be with the innocent, and you will come to me."

She gave a low moan, as of bodily pain. It was time for them to part. A warder came to conduct the condemned prisoner away.

"Laurence! Laurence!" cried the heart-broken girl, clasping his arm so that he might not go.

He gently freed himself from her hold. He put her from him and looked at her—for the last time—in her exquisite, flower-like beauty, that was sweetened, not spoiled, by grief. And, as he looked, he nerved himself for the final wrench—the awful sacrifice of her and of his joy.

"Good-bye, my beloved one," he faltered. "God bless you all through your life."

And then he suffered himself to be led from the room. But at the door he turned and looked back.

"It is this that is death," he muttered, as he staggered away. "Not the killing of the body that is to come by and by. This—this is the worst. From this moment I have died!"

CHAPTER VI

THE NEWSPAPER

WHATEVER Geraldine Lucas thought concerning the terrible sentence pronounced upon the man she so deeply loved, there was one by whom the result of that trial was received with intense satisfaction.

Ralph Vickers made an outward show of commiserating Laurence Gray, but consistently maintained that the verdict was the only possible one.

Poor Gray, he said, had been tempted to take a few pounds of his governor's cash—who could say what little expenses a young man might not have suddenly to meet? He had known all along that Gray was pinched for money, though it was no business of his to expose his own manager.

Gray had squared his accounts 'cutely; but he was a simpleton to suppose that Kesteven would fail to discover the defalcations. Guilty? Why, of course he was guilty. Who could question it? As to that knife, that was where Gray had tripped. He might have known that the weapon would be identified.

But there you are, you see; the man was no doubt impelled to take the first weapon at hand, and so he left a loophole, as so many criminals do.

"I always thought," added Vickers, "that Gray was a villain at heart. Anyway, he'll get his just punishment now, and Miss Lucas will be spared the disgrace of marrying a criminal."

These were Ralph Vickers's arguments. But in his breast he nursed a gloating satisfaction that the jury had been so blinded by the evidence of circumstance. The evidence of the motive, of the journey in the train, of the weapon—every coincidence had been convincing and conclusive.

Laurence Gray was to be hanged! He would have no chance now of defending himself or setting the law upon the trail of the real assassin. The arm of justice was sure and prompt, and dead men could tell no tales.

That last phrase echoed as a familiar harmony in Ralph Vickers's brain, repeating and asserting itself hour by hour. Dead men tell no tales! Dead men tell no tales! It had first formed itself in his mind in connection with Charles Kesteven, at the time when that sharp-eyed accountant had first discovered the doubtful entries in the books of Christopher Lucas and Co.

It had rung in his brain at the ball at Fenton Court, attuning itself to the regular swing of the waltz music, on that foggy night in February, when Ralph Vickers, alone among men, knew that Charles Kesteven lay dead upon the railway embankment, with Laurence Gray's knife sticking in his breast.

The phrase repeated itself again with quickened meaning when the solemn words of the judge declared the awful doom of an innocent man. The few short days that were to elapse between that sentence and its fulfilment would soon pass by, and then—dead men tell no tales!

Thus Ralph Vickers comforted himself. His nerves were steadier now than they had been previous to the terrible ordeal of his own brief examination in court. None who heard his straightforward evidence could possibly have dreamt of the awful fears that were as red-hot brands of steel about his brow—fears that by the dropping of one incautious word, his own guilt might be discovered, and Laurence Gray set free. The ordeal was over now; he breathed more freely. But not until the scaffold had claimed its victim would the danger of discovery be entirely passed.

Vickers carefully read the press reports of the trial. Especially did he study the comments upon the case in the leading articles. But here there was nothing to cause him uneasiness.

About a fortnight after the delivery of the verdict, however, the office-boy, James Stinchcombe, came into the room where Vickers was writing.

"Yere's a bit o' noos as'll interest yer, Mr. Vickers," said the lad. "It's all abart Mr. Gray."

And he pulled out from his trouser's pocket three tightly folded journals, two of them illustrated and very much pocket-worn. The third was an evening edition of the *Fleet Street Gazette*.

"Nooso? Mr. Gray?" echoed Vickers, with a sardonic smile. "What has Mr. Gray got to do with a noose? His time for that will come on Monday morning."

"Oo're yer gettin' at, sir?" said James. "I didn't say *noose*, I said noos. Just you read wot it says in this yer piper, sir. I've bin a-readin' of it."

"You are not supposed to read newspapers when you're sent on a message, James," said Vickers reprovingly. "Go into the outer office and copy the letters I've put on your desk—the type-written ones."

"Right, sir," said James, returning the still unopened *Gazette* to his side-pocket.

"No, you can leave the paper here, James. I'll just glance at it presently," said Vickers carelessly.

"Wot, in the guv'nor's time, sir?" returned the lad, winking knowingly. "Well, that ain't 'arf bad, that ain't."

The office-boy had not closed the door a moment, when Ralph Vickers grabbed at the paper James had left on his desk, and nervously opened it. His eyes fell upon a front page leaderette, headed "A Legal Murder"; they caught sight of the name of Laurence Gray. He spread out the paper nervously and began to read.

"We are progressing," the article began. "After legal robbery comes the consummation of the act of legal murder by the execution of Laurence Gray. The unfortunate prisoner, now lying under the death sentence in Newgate, will be hanged on Monday. This is convenient for the prosecution, for the ghosts of the legally murdered never haunt the corridors of the Home Office."

Vickers looked round to assure himself that he was alone. He continued to read:

"The Home Secretary, we are told this morning, is still deliberating upon the case. We are glad to hear it. But so far he has omitted to do one thing,

and that is to hear full evidence on Gray's side. Laurence Gray has not been heard, nor has Laurence Gray's lawyer. We are assured by the prisoner's solicitor that the judge, whose summing-up sent the accused man to the gallows, is himself no longer convinced that the evidence of his guilt is so strong as it appeared to him at the Old Bailey. The opposing hypothesis was not adequately presented by the counsel for the defence.

"It is terrible to think of the possibility of that hypothesis being correct. Life is a sacred thing, and the Home Secretary might well shudder at the thought of sending to the gallows one who is not only innocent, but who is probably the only witness by whom the crime may yet be brought home to the actual murderer.'

Ralph Vickers drew a deep gasping breath. He scarcely dared to read farther.

"The sand in the glass is rapidly running out. But there is yet time for the Prime Minister to insist upon a respite for at least another week to give opportunity of fully and completely sifting the evidence.

"Let the Home Secretary listen to the story of the condemned man himself. Let him carefully follow the evidence concerning the abstraction of the fatal weapon from the office of Mr Christopher Lucas. Let him discover where and by whom that knife was sharpened for its bloody work.

"Let him assure himself that at Gospel Oak station, on the night of the murder, no person or persons other than the condemned man entered the compartment in which Charles Kesteven met his death. Above all, let the Home Secretary investigate the supposed motive of the crime, and determine whether the defalcations discovered by the deceased accountant were the defalcations of Laurence Gray, and of Laurence Gray alone."

Vickers, seeing how closely the conjectures of the newspaper writer approached the actual truth, clenched his long hands in impotent misgiving and wrath. What business had these journalists to meddle with the affair, to stir up doubts, to incite people to further search? The trial was over, the sentence pronounced; why couldn't they hold their peace and let the law take its

course? Why couldn't they forget that hated man—at this point Vickers ground his teeth—who was waiting for his end far enough out of their sight?

Then slowly his anger passed into terror. What if this agitation should bring about a reprieve?

The thought appalled him. He grew deadly pale, and ran his fingers nervously through his black hair. If Gray should remain alive, his own secret guilt might at any time be revealed to the world. He started and gazed at the door, as if even at that moment he dreaded lest some emissary of the law should enter the office where he sat and should demand his secret.

CHAPTER VII

A MESSAGE OF LIFE

It was on the forenoon of a Sunday that the welcome news reached Laurence Gray. On the previous night he had faintly heard from a distance the first preparation of the carpenters in the shed where the awful scaffold was to be erected. Terrible though the sound was it did not lessen his courage. Already his heart's life was over. Why, then, should he dread the mere passing of life from the body?

His feelings as he sat in the chapel on the Sunday morning were those of brave resignation. The short address of the prison chaplain brought him crowning comfort and peace. Never had he prayed more fervently; never had divine service wheresoever he had joined in it appealed to him with more sacred meaning than on this day that he believed would be his last on earth.

Calm still, he returned to his cell. But scarcely had he entered when the door was flung open, and the governor of the prison came in, followed by the chaplain. They came to inform him that he was not to die.

He heard them blankly at first, doubting still. When at last the glad truth dawned on his brain, he gave a cry of thanksgiving. The shadows that had closed about him vanished, and in their place a rush of glorious light flooded his soul. Life was his again, life made a

thousand times dearer by the near risk of its loss. For a few moments he imagined that he was to be restored to liberty also. But soon he realised that the commutation of his sentence still meant that he was to spend the rest of his young days as a miserable convict inpenal servitude. For twenty years—he felt that clemency might come then—for twenty long and bitter years he was to be a prisoner, exiled from the world he loved so well; with no other associates than brutal criminals and harsh prison officials; with no other home than the bare white walls of his cell. Oh, how could he live through all that weary time? He would be almost an old man in twenty years.

And Geraldine—would she wait for him? Would she be true to him all that time? Ah no, he dared not think of her in that way now. Before, when the sombre shadow of death hung over him, he yet had hoped to meet her again in the bright world beyond the grave.

But in twenty years? What would he be then? A degraded man, with the marks of his terrible servitude upon him, depraved and sullied, perhaps, by intimate association with criminals whose imprisonment was the just punishment for the evil work they had done—men who were in many cases little above the beasts.

Not long did Laurence Gray receive the temporary leniency that is accorded a condemned man. On the following morning—the Monday morning—he was taken from his cell, and marched with other convicts to the prison bath. There, in the presence of warders and prisoners, he was ordered to strip and wash himself in a large tank of not over-clean water. His own clothes of freedom were then forfeited, and in their place he was supplied with a coarse, blue-striped shirt, a rough grey short jacket, trousers, and vest, and a greasy little cap, a pair of darned stockings, and thick shoes.

He thanked God that Geraldine could not see him in that hideous guise. But later on he was submitted to a yet more degrading process. An evil-looking prison orderly came into his cell, and at once proceeded to shave off the little moustache, which Laurence had held sacred. Then his brown curls were clipped and clipped with a

pair of clumsy shears, until there was not a hair upon his head that his fingers could take hold of.

Thus shorn and clothed as a convict, he felt his degradation complete. But there was more to follow. Every morning he was obliged to go down on his knees in his cell, and with two hard brushes, polish the asphalt floor. Already it so shone that he could almost see his face in it.

Then his copper wash-basin and tin utensils, his table, stool, and, indeed, every article in the cell, had also to be scoured or polished by him. Spotless cleanliness is one of the prime regulations of Her Majesty's prisons.

After breakfast of gruel and bread, some pieces of hard tar rope were thrown in to him, together with an instrument called by prisoners a "fiddle," consisting of a nail and a piece of cord. With the aid of this instrument, he was required to divide the strands of the tar rope, and with his fingers reduce them to what is everywhere known as oakum.

Four pounds of oakum is the quantity demanded of each healthy prisoner as a day's work. But it was not for many days that Laurence succeeded in his task. The rope was hard as wood, and his fingers, since the old working days in the Lancashire factory, had become soft and unaccustomed to labour.

In that cold and comfortless cell, and with his mind still terribly oppressed, his first days of durance passed like long weeks. Already he was beginning to feel the awful monotony of prison life—the work, the exercise in the high-walled yard, the morning visits of the governor, the fussy officialism, the food, never varied.

As to the food itself, Laurence ate little of it. It was not appetising. For breakfast, the nauseous skilly and dry bread; for dinner a few soapy potatoes, and two or three ounces of ill-cooked meat, or soup made of the liquor the meat had been boiled in the day before; for supper, cocoa and bread. This was the unvarying fare.

Laurence Gray was among the first of the prisoners that session to be drafted off to a convict station. Handcuffed, he was conducted to the dismal prison van, pushed into a narrow compartment, and there

locked in. The Black Maria was driven off through the noisy streets of London, he knew not whither.

His neighbours on either side of him kept up a lively conversation throughout the journey. They were evidently old birds.

"Wot cher, Darkie?" began one.

"'Ello, Nipper, yer there, eh? Where are we barned for this journey—the Scrubs?"

"Ay, I reckon that's the crib. 'Tain't such a dusty place. I'd sooner be in there than the Bank any day. Young Lacy's one o' the screws at the Scrubs, don't yer know? 'Im as were at Wands'orth last time me and you done a laggin' together. Wot's yer lot this time, mate?"

"Two years 'ard."

"Oh, that'll soon parss. Mine's five stretches. But the cove wot's between us, 'e's a lifer, ain't 'e?"

"Ay; it's 'im as done that little job at Gospel Oak?"

Laurence did not understand the prison slang these men used, but he gathered that the destination was Wormwood Scrubs Prison, and so it proved to be.

On entering the prison gates he was relieved of his handcuffs. Documents giving full particulars of his name, weight, measurements, case, and sentence, were examined and verified. After the customary bath, he was furnished with other clothes of a yet more distinctly convict type than those worn at Newgate, and a circular badge that was sewn upon his left sleeve bore the letter "L," signifying that he was a life convict, and also the letter "R," indicating the year, and the number "99," by which distinctive number he was afterwards to be known, his name being sunk.

During the probationary imprisonment at Wormwood Scrubs he was kept in solitary confinement. His cell, however, was provided with a wooden floor. His occupation was the monotonous one of picking oakum. But saving this, his hardships were not more severe than he expected. The prison was a new one, and its governor and warders were inclined to leniency.

The food, though it differed a little from that of Newgate, was yet not unwholesome. Had the whole term of his penal servitude been as free from painful

discomfort, the misery of his own mind would have been his greatest trouble.

But Laurence Gray little dreamt of the terrible anguish, the torture, the degradation, that were in store for him in other and more distant scenes, to which he was soon to be removed.

On a certain rainy night Ralph Vickers took up his post, waiting, anxiously watching at one of the platforms of the Great Western Railway terminus. In the mail train near which he stood, smoking a cigar, there was a large third-class carriage that had evidently been specially reserved.

At last the expected vehicle arrived—a prison van. Vickers went towards it, keeping in the shadow. A prison warder sprang from his seat at the back, and was joined by several other officials in uniform similar to his own, and armed with swords and loaded revolvers.

One by one twelve men alighted. Their chains rattled as they stepped upon the pavement. They were all in prison garb—short loose jackets, baggy knickerbockers of drab tweed with wide black stripes, blue woollen stockings ringed with red, grey, and red worsted caps. Each convict wore handcuffs, and a long running chain connected him with his neighbour by a loop through the left handcuff.

They crossed the platform, guarded by their warders, and stood by the carriage reserved for them in the train. Some of the twelve laughed and joked as they begged tobacco from the crowd who watched them. But the last man of the gang walked with his handsome head erect, and with his eyes fixed steadily before him. There was a look of hard determination in his haggard shaven face, as he stood in the light of one of the gas-lamps.

Ralph Vickers had little difficulty in recognising him. Despite the cropped hair, the shaven lip, the convict dress, Laurence Gray was yet as a prince among those low-browed, crime-stained men. Vickers, still keeping in the shadows, looked searchingly at the badge on Gray's left arm. He drew nearer.

"L. R. Ninety-nine," he murmured half aloud.

But at the sound of that voice Laurence looked round.

At the sudden recognition, Vickers sprang forward with open hands outstretched, as in true friendship and sympathy.

"Gray," he said, "be brave. *She* sent me here. She sent me here to tell you that—"

But one of the warders brushed him roughly aside and hurried the men into the carriage. Vickers drew back and disappeared among the crowd.

"At last I have discovered him," he muttered between his teeth. "Convict 99. Grimley Prison. Good. I shall not forget. My way is clear."

And with another look at the man he had wronged, the man who was now bearing the burden of his guilt, Ralph Vickers sauntered quietly away, meditating yet another crime.

CHAPTER VII

A PENAL SETTLEMENT

"SHE sent me here," Vickers had said; "she sent me to tell you that—"

That *what?* Oh, what had been the purport of those unspoken words? Oh, cruel, taunting fate that had caused them to be left unheard, unknown! She, Geraldine, had sent Ralph Vickers to deliver some kindly message that might give her imprisoned lover hope and comfort in his abject misery. Little did the officious warder, who so roughly pushed Vickers aside, dream of the tempest of anguish and disappointment that now raged in the prisoner's breast. What would Laurence not have given—what increase of bodily suffering would he not have willingly endured if he could but have heard the message to its end?

"Be brave, Gray; she sent me here." That was all Laurence had heard. But even these few words made his dead heart leap with a strong, new vigour as he repeated them. They gave him solace for many a long and torturing hour.

When, with his fellow-convicts, he had stepped from the prison van and entered the railway station, he

had been overwhelmed by a sense of the terrible possibility of being observed by someone who had known him in the free world—ashamed to be seen there in that public place, with his hands fettered by the horrible chains of slavery, and wearing that hideous prison garb bearing the unsightly marks of the broad arrow. He had hoped that the darkness would shield him from recognition. But he had been recognised; Ralph Vickers had seen him. It was comforting, nevertheless, to know that Vickers was a friend—a true friend, who did not despise him or mock at him in his shame, but who had stretched forth his hands in sympathy.

Ah, Laurence Gray, you did not know that those seeming friendly hands had done the very deed whose bitter punishment you were now bearing! that it was they that had thrust you into the ranks of the outcast! You did not know that the very reason of Vickers coming thus to behold you was only that he might have it in his power to push you down yet deeper into the abyss of misery. Neither did you dream that the words which gave you comfort were no words of Geraldine Lucas, but only the utterance of a false and cunning schemer, who made them the excuse of approaching you, that he might see the number on your convict's badge, and thereby know better how to mark you out for tyranny and cruelty, such as only the worst of your desperate companions would have to endure.

During that long night journey Laurence, buoyed up by the thought of that message, wondering, too, how Geraldine had contrived to learn that he was to be changing from one prison to another on that particular night, rested his head against the back of the seat and closed his eyes. The rattling of the railway carriages was an agreeable contrast to the terrible silence of the cell he had left. He could not sleep. The steel of his handcuffs rasped his wrists at every movement of the chain, and his companions, despite the interference of the warders, took advantage of their temporary freedom from strict discipline, and kept up a coarse conversation that made him wish he could close his ears as well as his eyes.

The train had not long started when one of the warders, sniffing the air suspiciously, flashed his lantern-light on Laurence.

"Ninety-nine," he growled, "you've got some tobacco there. I can smell it. Out with it. I saw that swell give it you on the platform. Come, out with it."

"You mistake, sir; I have no tobacco," said Laurence.

"Open your mouth, you liar."

Laurence obeyed. With a long pencil the warder probed under his tongue and about the inside of his cheeks, but finding that the teeth and breath were above suspicion he passed to the next convict, a youth of about nineteen, and one of the noisiest of the gang.

Short as had been their time upon the railway platform, this youth had managed to get hold of some tobacco from one of the onlookers. Not being able to smoke it, he had stuffed it into his mouth and was now chewing it. Fearing discovery, he had been swallowing the juice. Long abstinence had probably lessened his power of resisting the chemical properties of nicotine. There was no need for the warder to search him. His pale face betrayed him.

Laurence did not seek to enter into conversation. He had already learned that there is little to be gained from intercourse with the criminal class.

In the exercise yard at Wormwood Scrubs, where talking, though forbidden, was surreptitiously indulged in, he had attempted to relieve his oppressed mind by listening to the woes of others.

He was not one of those who haughtily look down upon men of a lower social grade than their own. His early association with the working-men of the Lancashire factories had taught him that honest hearts and pure and noble lives are not matters of caste distinction.

But he soon discovered that a convict prison is not the place where intellectual or high-minded conversation may be expected. Among his companions there were, indeed, some who had held enviable social positions, and who, if their crimes had been undiscovered and unpunished, would probably have scorned to hold discourse with a Blackburn weaver.

But a convict prison levels all social distinctions, and the wealthy banker who has committed a felony, or the clergyman who has fraudulently appropriated the funds of charity, finds himself no better treated and no more respected than the rough who has half-murdered his wife, or the burglar who has robbed a duchess of her diamonds. All are criminals.

The large number of those who were with him in the train happened, as Laurence gathered, to be criminals of the baser sort. The youth beside him had attempted to cut his sweetheart's throat; two of those opposite were seamen who had headed a mutiny; another was an Italian, of Saffron Hill, who had stabbed a policeman; and a fourth was a low-browed burglar, on whose face were written the traces of his manifold crimes.

Daybreak enabled Laurence to turn his attention to the passing country.

How grateful to him was the sight of the green fields and the white-walled cottages with the rosy light of the rising sun upon them. Not again would his eyes rest upon such peaceful scenes. He soon was leaving the outer world, it might be for ever; for who could tell if he would survive the long years of his servitude, even if by good conduct he earned the remission of a portion of the dreadful term? As the train entered the more hilly country, he looked anxiously out for the signs which should tell him that they were nearing their destination.

At last the station nearest to Grimley was reached. Here the arrival of a gang of convicts excited no great interest. Two prison vans waited outside. In these the fettered men were conveyed several miles beyond the town. The laboured tread of the horses indicated that the roads were steep. At length the prisoners were ordered to alight and travel on foot.

The first thing that impressed Laurence was the clear fresh air that blew upon his face, carrying with it the faint, sweet, nutty odour of gorse-blossom.

He heard a lark singing in the blue sky; from a neighbouring copse a cuckoo called. Around and about on every side stretched a wide undulating moor, that

rose into high hills towards the north. Here and there the gorse shone in the sunlight like a meadow of gold, and through the lower valley a wide river gleamed.

It was all like a beautiful dream. But the clanking of the chain at his wrist, the voices of the officers, and the sight of his companions, brought him rudely back to hideous reality.

On the summit of a high hill in the blue distance stood the gloomy walls of his future home. Laurence could only vaguely conjecture what this wild wilderness would be like in a winter storm.

He had a further presentiment of coming hardship when, on a closer approach to the prison, he saw the pickets of the civil guard—soldiers most of them, and all armed with rifles and bayonets—forming a cordon round the prison, and its outdoor gangs of convicts. Here he saw a party of bogmen engaged in turf-cutting, there another gang digging trenches, and yet others employed in some agricultural work.

The large number of warders in their midst indicated how careful a watch was kept. He looked about for the stone-quarries he had heard of in the train, but they were on the further reaches of the hill.

Presently they passed through a sort of village of neat cottages—the dwellings of the officials and their families—with a few small shops and a public-house. Then came the ponderous gateway of the prison itself, of heavy granite, set in the high wall surrounding the buildings of the penal settlement. At one side of the gate was the governor's residence, at the other that of his deputy.

The new arrivals were marched into the receiving-ward, where their shackles were removed. They were then taken by two warders down a glass-roofed passage to the bathing-house. Here there were some thirty stone baths divided off with boards. Ten minutes were allowed for undressing, bathing, and dressing again. The warders paraded the length of the baths to prohibit all talking, and to watch that the men made themselves properly clean.

After the bathing, they returned to the outer passage, where dinner was served—mutton soup, with potatoes

and vegetables. Still remaining in the passage, they were told to take off their shoes and stockings, jackets, vest, and knickerbockers, and to place them in a row, each man's suit apart.

This done, they were marched into an office, where sat the deputy governor, the chief warder, and the doctor. The twelve new prisoners were then ordered to strip naked, that all marks on their bodies might be recorded and checked by the reports forwarded by the authorities of Wormwood Scrubs Prison.

Chafing at this indignity, Laurence Gray nevertheless quietly submitted to the medical examination, as he had submitted to all other prison rules.

When he had passed the survey of the doctor, and been pronounced in perfect health, he was directed to take clean underclothing from a bundle near the window. In the meantime, his outer clothing had been carefully searched. Even a crooked pin that he had picked up in the railway carriage, had been taken out of his jacket.

Having dressed again, he was provided with an extra pair of heavy boots, and a suit of coarse working clothes, including a slop jacket of blue-and-red striped canvas, such as he had seen worn by some of the gangs outside the prison. He judged by this that he was to be an outdoor worker.

When, a little later, his hair having been cropped, he was being taken with his companions out of the receiving-ward, he heard the measured tramp of many feet. The outdoor gangs were returning from work, for it was Saturday afternoon, when prisoners are occupied within the cells, cleaning up for Sunday.

Each gang marched past in military order, double file, attended by its officers, who, as they passed the gate, reported to the chief warder the number of men under their charge. These numbers were verified by the entries of the morning. Every officer as he came in delivered to the armourers his rifle, bayonet, belt, and cartridge-box. The gangs numbered in all some four hundred men. They were followed by the civil guard, who marched in with fixed bayonets.

When the gates were closed, Laurence and his fellows

were conducted to their respective cells in various galleries of the building.

Left alone in his cell Laurence stood still, while the slamming of the heavy iron door echoed repeatedly in his heart. A sense of unutterable loneliness overcame him. His misery was increased by the deep gloom of his cell—a gloom which, in the parts farthest from the little window, amounted almost to darkness. A long time passed before his eyes grew sufficiently accustomed to this obscurity to enable him to take a survey of his surroundings.

The apartment was seven feet long, four feet broad, and about eight feet high. The walls were of corrugated iron, the floor was of thick slate slabs. The window, a very narrow one of coarse plate-glass, looked inward near the heavy door. Under this window was a small flap-table, and at this spot only was there enough light to read by.

A shelf was erected above the door, where the convict's spare boots and cleaning rags were to be kept. There was another wider shelf at the inner end, a few feet above the floor. Here was his bedding, rolled up in a neat compact bundle, together with a tin plate, a candlestick, a tin pint cup, a tin knife, a wooden spoon, a wooden salt-cellar, and an ordinary school slate and pencil.

Under this shelf was his hammock, strapped against the wall. In the middle of the floor stood a low wooden stool and a wooden bucket, and in one of the corners were a hand-broom and a scrubbing-brush, with a flannel and a piece of soap.

While he was making this mental inventory one of the warders ran along the gallery into which the cells opened, taking the roll. This was done by counting not the men but their brooms, which were thrust out under the gap of the doorway of each cell. Laurence was roughly bidden to thrust his broom out also.

For the rest of that afternoon he was engaged in cleaning his utensils. His warder supplied him with clean sheets, new soap, salt, and a candle, instructed him where he was to keep each article, and also how his hammock was to be slung.

This warder's name was Gannaway. He was power-

fully built and soldierly-looking, with a florid complexion and small keen eyes. He looked at Laurence searchingly as if trying to discover what sort of a man his new charge might be.

"When you hear 'Beds down' called out," he said, "you must fix your hammock so; but not before then, mind you."

"What work am I to be put to, sir?" Laurence ventured to ask.

"What do you say? What's your 'graft' to be? Wait till Monday and you'll see. You needn't expect to be playing billiards and lawn-tennis here, my lord. You're one of them gentlemen lags, I can see. We've got no 'graft' for swells here. H'm, strikes me you want a new strap to this hammock. The lag that was here before you was one of the right sort. *He* was no gent, he wasn't."

Laurence watched the man go out. His first impression of him was not such as Warder Gannaway would have been proud of.

On Sunday the getting-up bell did not ring until seven o'clock. After breakfast—cocoa and bread—there was an hour's exercise in the halls. Laurence was approached by one or two of the long-sentence convicts, who asked him furtively for news of the outer world. Newspapers were never allowed within the prison walls, and new arrivals are the only means by which intelligence of a public nature can ever by any covert chance reach a prisoner.

After exercise, church parade. After church, the usual Sunday's dinner of bread and cheese was served. From afternoon service until bedtime a prisoner of good conduct may have a book to read.

Laurence Gray thanked Heaven for this privilege. The blessed printed words took his mind for a while from the cankering grief and bitter humiliation that were driving him to melancholy.

There was another privilege for which he daily waited and prayed—the permission to write to his beloved. Every time a convict is removed from one prison to another he is allowed to write a letter within one month of the change. His relatives receive no other intimation

of his removal, and if the prisoner has lost his class, or is ill-behaved, the privilege of writing is denied him.

How passionately Laurence longed for the hour in which he might pen that first sad letter! It was not long as yet since Geraldine had heard of him; not many weeks had passed since his cutting-off from the bright living world of freedom and light and love.

Indeed, according to ordinary prison laws, he should now have been passing his nine months' probation of silence and solitary confinement in Wormwood Scrubs.

But the crowding of that prison, owing to the recent closing of Millbank, had necessitated a premature drafting of several gangs of convicts to the country penal settlements, and he had been among those chosen to go.

All day now he dreamed of what he should say in that letter to Geraldine. The true, strong, heart-wrung words he should put in it made themselves into a tune in his head, a sweet tune to which his labouring arms kept time. He worked desperately hard in order to win commendation, and thereby bring the yearned-for time of writing nearer. For the same reason he forced himself to bear patiently and silently the keenest indignities, the most stinging humiliations, the cruellest abuse. To send that letter one day sooner to his beloved one he would have suffered torture.

At last came the prayed-for time. On one evening in each week there is school for such of the convicts as cannot read or write properly, or who have not mastered arithmetic. Laurence, being well educated, did not need instruction, and might employ the school hour in reading or doing nothing. On the second school evening after his arrival at Grimley, he was allowed to write his letter "home."

Poor orphan fellow! he had no home, except where Geraldine was. But the prison chaplain's words, that he might write "home," set him thinking of the Lancashire days, and the little house in Blackburn, that had been his home when he was a child.

He covered his face with his hands at the thought of what his dear, dead mother would have felt could she have known that he was here—a wrongfully-branded man, a convict, thrust in among the blood-stained and the evil.

Desperately he drew towards him the pen, ink, and paper, with which he had been supplied. Orphaned, alone in the world as he was, he felt that if Geraldine's love had forsaken him, he should surely have gone mad.

It was but a poor ghost of a letter that he could write. The paper was regulation paper, on which was already written his name, his register number, and the date. There were lines of printed directions as to rules he was not to infringe. He was to keep his writing on the lines, and neither write between them nor cross his letter.

He was not to say anything about any other prisoner, or give any prison news; neither was he to use any improper language, nor write to any improper person.

Both the governor and the chaplain read and initial the prisoners' letters, those received as well as those sent. Anything infringing the rules, or considered improper for a prisoner to know or make known, is struck out.

There was a notice on the back of Laurence's sheet of paper, informing the recipient that a reply was to be limited to strictly private and personal matters. Any allusion to public affairs—any item of general news—would be obliterated, or the letter containing it would be returned.

Thus trammelled by regulations, Laurence wrote his letter. There was much that he could not say—heart-cries of love that he had to repress because other eyes than Geraldine's would read them.

But every word that was written was deep with meaning, glowed with a whole life's earnestness. And when the letter was done and sent away, a new hope rose in him, and, for the first time since his condemnation, the sleep that came to him that night was sleep indeed—restful, and long, and deep.

CHAPTER IX

THE MASK OF FRIENDSHIP

On a certain evening when, as he well knew, Mr. Christopher Lucas would be away from home, Ralph Vickers called at Fenton Court and asked to see Geraldine.

As he was by no means sure that under ordinary circumstances she would consent to receive him, he told the footman to say that he had called on very important business. He was shown into the drawing room to wait for her.

He sat down on a divan and looked about the familiar room with ever fresh appreciation of its luxury and beauty. Certainly, after the dark foggy streets, it was like fairyland; the soft tones of the rich carpet, the delicate silk of the hangings, the terra-cotta brocade of the couches and divans, the tall palms rising in shady corners, and over all the tender glow of the stately sentinel lamps—all combined to form a harmonious picture that pleased his artistic sense.

For the evil-natured Ralph Vickers had as keen a love of beauty in outward things as had Laurence Gray himself.

Even now, as his satisfied eye dwelt on the scene about him, the thought flashed across his mind that not the least among his hated victim's sufferings must be the contrast between the luxury he had left and the bare and hideous surroundings of the hell upon earth where, sunk deep amid the seething infamy of vilest criminals, he dragged out his innocent days.

Ralph Vickers smiled complacently at the comparison. As he smiled he said to himself with cruel satisfaction that most likely—indeed certainly, if he could have any hand in the matter—Laurence Gray would not live long to suffer from these altered conditions. For though the law did not now will his death, yet his merciless enemy did. And Ralph Vickers's enmity was more to be dreaded than the law.

Scarcely had that evil smile died from Vickers's lips when the door of the room opened and Geraldine Lucas entered slowly. There was a cold dignity in her step and bearing, showing plainly that she was not glad to greet this man whom from the very first she had instinctively distrusted. She advanced towards him with the stateliness of a young queen, bowed coldly as if she had not seen his proffered hand, and, seating herself, waited for him to state the " very important business " that alone had induced her to grant him an interview.

Her haughty coldness only fanned the flame of his passion for her. He thought such a manner suited her beauty well—her wonderful beauty that to-night was enhanced by the delicate tint of her dress, a faint, tender green as of the lilac leaf, into whose silken fabric scattered sprays of rosy-shaded apple-blossom were exquisitely woven. Above these hues her fair head shone with an added lustre, and her pure skin seemed white as the petals of a lily.

The sight of her loveliness made Ralph Vickers's hatred for his rival yet more bitter. He would have liked to tell her at once of his love for her, and ask her passionately how she could allow herself to think any more of Laurence Gray—a convict whom the gallows had reluctantly spared. But he dared not do this yet. He must wait. He must dissimulate.

"I have come," he said in a sympathetic voice, "to speak of one who is dear to both of us—to me as a friend, to you in an infinitely greater degree. You know whom I mean?"

"Laurence Gray?"

"Yes."

"I prefer that you should not speak of him," she said quickly, overborne by her dislike of the man before her.

Then she caught her breath suddenly. Could it be that this man really knew anything concerning Laurence that was worth her hearing? If so, she must not let personal prejudice prevent him from speaking it.

Meanwhile Vickers's handsome face had assumed a pained expression. He leaned towards her, his fascinating eyes full of appealing softness.

"Why do you doubt me, Miss Lucas? No, don't deny it. I can read in your face that you doubt me, I can hear it in your voice. You wrong me very cruelly, when my only wish is to sympathise with you and help you."

Geraldine rose, partly to hide her embarrassment, and slowly crossed the room to the hearth, where she stood looking at the burning logs.

"Won't you believe in my sincerity and trust me?" proceeded Vickers insinuatingly.

The beautiful girl, influenced by his voice, and

desperately in need of a friend, turned suddenly and held out her hand.

"Yes," she said impetuously, "I will trust you absolutely. And now say what you are going to say about Laurence."

She little dreamed what anguish that newly-given trust would cost her lover.

Ralph Vickers saw how the mention of Gray's name sent a sudden flush to warm the whiteness of her cheeks, and a hot jealous anger sprang up in him. Nevertheless, his voice was quite calm as he rejoined:

"I believe as firmly as you do that Gray is innocent. I have never once doubted it, in spite of the facts looking so dark against him. I believe his innocence will be proved before long, by some means or other; but, meanwhile, I think that those who care for him should do their best to lessen the hardships of his lot. For this means I place myself at your disposal. I will do anything for him—both for his sake and for yours."

Geraldine moved towards him, her eyes shining, her whole face suddenly radiant.

"Do you think it possible to help him now?" she asked eagerly. "Is it in any way possible. Oh, if it were"—she clasped her hands in her earnestness "I would give anything, all I have, to spare him one moment's suffering!"

She said this to the man who would have sold his own soul to cheat Laurence Gray out of a moment's joy.

"I am sure it is possible," Vickers replied decidedly. "Laurence himself cannot be reached, of course; but his warders may be got at, and money given to them would secure him as much kindness and comfort as a prisoner can have. I have found out where he is."

"I also know," interrupted Geraldine, in a tone that thrilled with gladness.

Vickers started to his feet.

"You know? How?"

"I have had a letter from him; I will read you some of it."

Vickers sat aghast, until suddenly it occurred to him that at stated intervals prisoners were allowed to write

to their relatives and friends. He cursed in his heart the laxity that permitted them this privilege.

Geraldine did not see the change upon his face. She had moved away towards the conservatory entrance, and was standing there in the shadow with her back to him.

"She's taking that letter from her breast," he said to himself. The thought made his blood boil. He clenched his hands convulsively, but instantly relaxed them again as Geraldine turned and came back across the long room with Laurence's letter in her hand.

"He is at Grimley," she said in a voice that was tremulous with unshed tears, and then she bent her mist-filled eyes upon the coarse prison paper. "They don't let him tell much—nothing about his daily life. But he is well, and does not seem despairing; and for both these blessings I thank God!"

The tears escaped, and rolled down her cheeks like falling pearls. But to Ralph Vickers they were as drops of gall whose very sight poisoned his blood.

"Can you write back to him?" he asked in a stifled voice.

"I have written already," answered Geraldine, smiling brightly through her tears. "But it was according to the prison rules printed on the back of this letter. They let one say so little. It nearly broke my heart to write such a miserable little note. But I said that my love for him, and my trust in him, were just the same, that they would always be the same. That assurance will help him to bear the long, hard days until the truth comes out, and he is released."

She stopped a moment, and stood looking doubtfully at Vickers, as if wondering whether she had said too much.

"I speak freely to you, Mr. Vickers," she added, "because you are my father's friend, and you have assured me that you are Laurence's and mine. I know Laurence was friendly towards you. He esteemed you highly."

No stab of self-reproach or remorse wounded Vickers's treacherous heart at these words. He answered with feigned earnestness:

"And I will repay his esteem by devoting myself now to his service and yours. To prove to you how much I have been trying to help you, I will tell you this: I did not expect he would be able to write and I made great efforts to find out where he was going to. I succeeded so far that I was on the railway platform when his gang started from London—"

"And you saw him?" cried Geraldine.

"I saw him and spoke to him. I tried to tell him how true you were, and hopeful; but before I could get out all the words, a warder pushed me away."

Geraldine walked to and fro with her hands clasped in eagerness.

"How good you were!" she murmured. Her tone sent a thrill through Vickers's passion-fevered veins.

"What did he look like?" she asked next. "Was he pale? Was he altered?"

"So altered that even you might not have recognised him. He was cropped and shaven, and ashy pale; very thin, too, and in chains."

"In chains?"

"He had handcuffs on, and was chained to the rest of the gang by a long chain."

Vickers was delighted thus to paint the degraded aspect of his rival. Geraldine—the beautiful, wealthy girl, bred in luxury, to whom all hardships seemed doubly cruel—gave a short, sharp cry of indignation and grief.

"And I cannot save him—cannot redeem him!" she wailed, walking over the thick, soft carpet. She looked around the room. "What right have I to be here—in comfort, in warmth, in guarded safety—while he is outcast and wretched, with his good name falsely blighted, and his hopes—our hopes—destroyed? But I will help him!" She stopped, and turned to Vickers. "Did you say that the prison warders might take money? I will give them anything—everything I have—if only they will be kind to him."

"They will probably take money," said Ralph Vickers reassuringly, "although it may be risky to tempt them. I can go down to Grimley and find out the warder who has most charge over Laurence. Most of the officials

of Grimley, I understand, have their homes outside the prison, and I would try to arrange with him to treat Laurence as well as is possible under prison *regime*. And as I have found out that a convict's life may be made bearable or unbearable, according to the kindness or cruelty of the warders he is placed under, I have no doubt that our bribe would effect a most happy result."

"Bribe!" repeated Geraldine, recoiling, and the ugly word sounded strange from her pure lips. "Would it be that? Would it be dishonourable—breaking the law?"

Vickers smiled. He saw that he must be careful of this noble-minded girl's delicacy. He wondered what she would think if she saw his naked soul with its black record of treachery and crime.

"It is not exactly what the law would approve of," he answered. "But you want to save him from needless suffering that perhaps might lead to madness."

"Madness!" Her golden head was thrown back, and her face lifted, white with horror. "Oh, Heaven! Might it drive him to that?"

"It might. But we must prevent it. I will take all the money I have——"

"No, no," she interrupted silencing him with a gesture. "I will find the money. It is my duty; it is the one thing that I can do now to show how dearly I love him, and that I am waiting for him still. Will you go soon? How much money will you want?"

"A great deal, I am afraid. But at first thirty pounds will do. I may have to pay my way to a hearing, you see."

"Yes, you must not spare money. I will get the thirty pounds now. When will you go?"

"As soon as I can get away. That depends on your father. By the way, is he to know of this?"

Geraldine paused on her way to the door.

"I think not—not yet," she said slowly. "He is the dearest of fathers, the kindest of men: but he does not love Laurence as I do; and he might not see that good may come of our action in this matter."

Vickers smiled softly to show that he understood. But when the door closed behind her his smile assumed a different expression.

Almost immediately he heard the light sound of her returning footsteps, and the soft rustle of her dress. He thought that the room grew brighter as she re-entered it.

She handed him the money she brought—blessed money, that might perhaps buy some little ease and peace for her beloved—and then asked when she should see him again.

"Before I start," he said; "as soon as my plans are fully made."

"Then I need not wish you God-speed to-night," she rejoined.

He held out his hand with pleading in his smile.

"Will you take my hand now?" he asked softly. His voice, his dark persuasive eyes, his whole manner had a fascination that was powerful even over those who doubted him. And Geraldine doubted him no longer.

"I have been unjust to you, Mr. Vickers," she said.

And then, bidding him good-night, she touched with hers that right hand that had driven the knife into Charles Kesteven's breast. Alas! why did not an avenging Fate make the accusing blood-spots re-appear in that dark moment on the smooth white skin whose outward cleanliness was a lie?

CHAPTER X

THE RIVAL'S TREACHERY

"Yes," said Warder Gannaway, as he lighted his pipe by the gas-jet in the little public-house that Laurence Gray had noticed outside the boundary of Grimley Prison; "yes, you may say as you like, mate; but if there's one sort of a lag I hate more'n another, it's a gentleman lag. A chap that's in for faking the broads, or doing a crack, or anything of that sort—a good out-and-outer—I can keep him under pretty tidy. But a gent—one of your 'ristocratic, lawn-tennis gentlemen lags—why, I hates the very sight of them."

"Och! you're too hard upon the poor gintlemen entirely, Mister Gannaway," said another warder, whose

name was O'Reilly. "Now let me ax you what objiction yez have to the lag yez were spakin' of the other day? Now, you know the boy I mane—what's this his number is again? Arrah! was there iver such a head as mine for figures? Him as came up from London wid the last gang. Sure, it was 'ninety-nine' wasn't it? and that's an aisy enough number to remimber any way. Well, is there anything distasteful to yez in that boy at all, at all?"

Gannaway did not answer at once. The aroma of a cigar caused him to look round the partition, behind which a stranger in a tourist suit sat reading a newspaper.

"Well, as to that chap," he now said, "he's not so bad as I expected when I first saw him in his cell. He's not so cheeky as some. He's an out-and-out green hand and not up to the graft yet. But he's a lifer, and I bet I'll make summat out of him before I've done with him." Here he nudged his companion's elbow, and added in a half-whisper: "Who's this bloke in the next bar, Jerry?"

"Faith, I don't know He's been there for the last hour and more—some gintleman on a walking tower, maybe. Hello! time's nearly up, begorra! Well, good-night to yez."

Warder O'Reilly went out, wiping some drops of "Irish" from his beard. Warder Gannaway presently followed, but had not gone far in the direction of his cottage when some one touched him on the arm.

"Can you tell me if I could get a room for the night in one of these cottages, officer?" asked Ralph Vickers.

"Well," said the warder, "if so be you're not particular as to its size, I believe my missis wouldn't mind taking you in. If you'll come along I'll see about it, sir."

Gannaway was on day duty, and his evening was free. An hour or so afterwards he was sitting at his hearth smoking one of Vickers's cigars. Vickers sat opposite to him. Mrs. Gannaway had just gone out on her Saturday's shopping. Already Vickers had gathered a good deal of information regarding prison rules and discipline, but he had not yet achieved his object.

"Now as to this Convict 99. You say that's not his

registered number in Grimley. Never mind. We'll refer to him as '99.' Of course you know he's in for the brutal murder of Kesteven, the London accountant?"

"I don't know what his crime is, sir. But if so be he's a friend of yours— "

"Friend? No, not a friend. I don't mind telling you that I have a grudge against him. It's not enough for me that he's simply in penal servitude."

"That's a different matter, sir. Well, what might you want to know about him? I can't break the bye-laws, you know."

"Of course not," smiled Vickers. "That is, unless you are well paid—*very* well paid."

"H'm! a man must live, sir; and with a wife and six children— "

"Look here," said Vickers, jumping to the point and speaking with all the insinuation he could command, "the man is in your power. You can do as you like with him. You can make him very uncomfortable; give him harder work, deprive him of privileges. You can contrive that he shall write no more letters."

"Wait a bit, sir," interrupted the warder. "Before you go any further, what about the pieces? What about the risk I should run? You want me to make it hard for him. Well, I could do that easily enough but not without—ah, now, that looks like business!"

This last interjection was called forth by the sight of a dozen bright sovereigns. Vickers added two or three more, and passed them over to Mr. Gannaway, who spat upon them, and slipped them into his pocket.

"Now," continued Vickers, "you can make his life a hell. Never mind what he suffers. You can drive him to anything—anything, do you hear? even to killing himself. He's a curse to his family, and they'd be glad enough to hear that he was under ground."

Warder Gannaway whistled, and jingled the golden coins in his pocket.

"Whew! That's how the wind blows, eh? But it's risky, sir. If I was to get dropped on, you see— "

"Have no fear. I'll give you a name and address that will find me, and you shall not want for another

supply of money when you satisfy me. Send me a newspaper by post, and I shall know by that that you are doing your best to make his life hard. And when you let me know that he is dead—*dead* mind you—whether by suicide, or by hard work, I'll pay you five, six, ay, ten times the amount I've now given you. By the way, what happens if a convict tries to escape ? "

" You may well say *tries*, sir. 'Tisn't often a lag succeeds in doing more at Grimley. What happens ? Why, if he's not caught in any other way, he gets a bullet in him. That's what happens, sir."

Vickers's eyes glanced meaningly at Warder Gannaway, and Warder Gannaway seemed to understand.

The early hours of the next day saw the beginning of the terrible work thus villainously planned.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE EXERCISE YARD

IT was earlier in the evening on that same Saturday of Ralph Vickers's journey to Grimley and interview with Warder Gannaway, and Laurence Gray sat in his cell re-reading for the twentieth time the letter that Geraldine had lately sent him in answer to his own.

He was very tired. He had laboured hard all day at the stone quarry, and since his return he had been busy with the preparations for Sunday—being cropped, putting on the clean clothes supplied to him, oiling his heavy working boots, taking in and arranging his weekly store of soap, candles, salt, cleaning-rags, and other necessaries, and washing the flags in front of his cell door.

All these things had taken a long time, so that he had but a few minutes of freedom before the signal, " Beds down," would be given. But the interval, short though it was, was long enough to give him the delight of feasting his eyes once again on the written words of that letter already learned by heart—the letter from his beloved, the only thing of his own that he was allowed to retain in his cell.

He had brought his hard wooden stool close by the little flap-table where his candle stood. The flickering light of the little yellow flame shone on the lines of the dear message. It was short, and the words were chosen with some restraint, for Geraldine could not pour out her heart freely in a letter that must pass under strangers' eyes. But she had said enough to comfort her and sustain the weary, yearning spirit of her lover.

"You must not doubt me, Laurence," she wrote. "You must not tremble because there is no bond between us; because, as you say, you have nothing to hold me by. Dearest, there is a bond between us—the bond of love and faith. That in my eyes is as close as the ties between parents and children, sisters and brothers. To you, who but for me are alone in the world, I want to be not lover only, but mother and sister too, and best, truest friend. I cannot write much here, but again I implore you to be hopeful. You have your life, and I am so overwhelmed with thankfulness for that great relief that I cannot despair of the rest. Be patient, dearest, and hope."

He kissed the letter passionately. Yes, he would hope. Why not? He was innocent—innocent! It could not be that he would have to languish all the bright years of his life in penal servitude. Why, it might be that this was the last Saturday that would see him in prison. The last? Oh, Heaven, that it might be so!

The retiring signal came. There was a shock throughout the whole building, a reverberation, as the hundreds of prisoners let down the straps of their hammocks at once. Laurence prepared his sheets and blanket, and then, with many another kiss, laid his beloved's letter tenderly away between the leaves of his prison Bible. Finally, he blew out the sickly candle flame, leaving the cell in darkness save for the two little streams of light that came in through the window and beneath the door from the nearest gas-burner on the landing.

Scarcely had he got into his hammock when the bell for the change of warders rang through the prison. The day warders left, and the night warders came on

duty. Presently Laurence, lying thinking in his hammock, was conscious of a flash of light across his face. It was the lantern of Jerry O'Reilly, the night watch, going his first round of the cells.

Laurence little guessed that at that moment his bitter enemy—the man who hated him as evil men always hate the stainless and noble—was close by him, almost within a stone's throw of his prison walls, plotting for him increased suffering, and seeking to compass his death.

On the following morning, while the prisoners of his particular landing were at exercise in the yard, Warder Gannaway took an opportunity of closely observing the man whom he had engaged secretly to torture. Previous to his interview with Ralph Vickers he had paid no more personal notice to Convict 99 than to any other well-behaved prisoner under his charge. He had simply classed him among the "gentlemen lags," whom he regarded as his natural enemies and possible victims. Himself an ignorant man—formerly a private in an infantry regiment, and now glorying in his authority over a few score of criminals—Gannaway felt himself at a disadvantage in dealing with such as were educated men, whose quick recognition of an injustice and readiness to resent an undue severity on the part of their warders kept him in constant check. Prisoners of the brutal sort, the seasoned lags, were inclined to the belief that a warder possessed unlimited power, and they submitted to whatever cruelty was imposed upon them without running the risk of further incensing the "screw" against them by reporting him. Men of better education very well knew that a warder is bound by the prison bye-laws no less than themselves, and that a prisoner may report a breach of discipline and appeal to the governor in cases wherein a warder has overstepped the limit of his authority. If ever a prisoner reported Warder Gannaway to his chief, it was ten chances to one that it was a gentleman lag who did so.

Of course the mere reporting affected him very little. He was secure in the consciousness that Captain Podmore, the governor of Grimley, regarded all convicts as

dogs, and that the word of a prisoner was never listened to in opposition to that of an official. Gannaway's principle, however, was to avoid doing anything that might be construed as an act of personal spite, and he was now meditating by what means he could fulfil his engagement with Ralph Vickers without the risk of Convict 99 discovering his intentions.

He watched Laurence Gray from a distance. The lag with whom Laurence was walking wore the blue braid facings that indicated he was a prisoner of the first class, working the last few months of his five years' sentence. His hair had been allowed to grow, and he was being fattened up for his release, so that his wife, if she were still alive, might imagine that he had been fed like a lord in prison. Laurence appeared to be talking with him with unusual interest. It was a small chance, but Warder Gannaway took advantage of it. He went towards the two men.

"None of that chattering there!" he growled. "Here Ninety-nine, fall back to the rear. I can see what you're up to. I know your tricks, getting alongside of a man that's going to be released. You're sending some message by him to your swell friends. Fall back to the rear. By the left, close up the files, there."

Laurence, thus separated from a man whose conversation had given him a few moments' surcease from the bitterness of gnawing regret, found himself placed with an old grey-haired man who was a stranger to him.

It was not long before his new companion spoke.

"Not much chance of choosing one's companions here, mate, is there?" he said under his breath.

"No," said Laurence. "But I see no earthly reason why I should have been separated from that man. I'm rather vexed, as he happens to be from my own part of the country."

"Oh, yes. Two Thousand is a Lancashire man. Rather a sad case, his. Do you know the circumstances?"

"No. I respect the etiquette of not asking a man anything about his misfortune," said Laurence.

"Exactly. Quite right. But that man's case is peculiarly sad. His offence against the law was

this: It happened that his child was ill with a quinsy, and she wanted some ripe fruit to eat. The father went out to a neighbouring orchard to buy a pound or two of jennet pears that grew there. The orchard-man and his family were all out, and the house was empty. So our friend thought he would go to the pear-tree and take what fruit he wanted and pay for it another day. He was picking a few pears and pocketing them when the owner of the orchard returned, caught him and gave him into custody. He was too poor to afford counsel; his plea that he really meant to pay for the pears was not listened to, and it was proved that he had been unfortunate once before. The case went against him. His first offence, for which he served two months, was that his dog had killed some partridges in the preserves of the magistrate who tried him. For his second offence, the supposed stealing of four ripe pears, the same considerate representative of the law sentenced him to five years' penal servitude."

"It is monstrous!" cried Laurence.

"To this day," continued the old man, "your Lancashire friend does not know if his child recovered from her illness, or if his wife has been able to keep out of the workhouse."

"Hasn't he written or received letters?" asked Laurence.

"No. Unfortunately he lost his marks, and was denied the privilege of writing. Until his release he will know nothing of his family, nor they of him. A good deal may happen in five years, you know. Ah, talking of those ripe pears always makes my mouth water. But there you are, mate; if we break our country's laws we must suffer the penalty. I broke them. Heaven knows I was guilty, and my crime is being justly punished.. I shall die a convict, for I can't outlive my sentence. There is hope for a strong young man like you. As for me—well, I shall have a nameless grave, I who have mixed with the best society in England."

Laurence looked down at the man's badge and saw that his sentence was similar to his own—life. He

gathered in further conversation that his companion had been a medical man with a large practice in Mayfair.

CHAPTER XII

MISHAP OR MURDER?

LAURENCE GRAY had heard many a sad life-history during the hours of exercise on Sundays, when the rigid rule against talking was somewhat relaxed. But the story of the Lancashire man—Convict 2,000—remained in his mind. It was a story which reminded him that, unhappy as was his own lot, there were others among his companions who endured an injustice not less hard. It was probable that this particular convict had lost his privilege of writing to his wife through his own misconduct or insubordination, but this made his case no less pitiable to Laurence, who had Geraldine's letter to comfort him. What would he have done without that token of her love? His knowledge that it was safe within the leaves of his Bible made even his dismal cell seem to him like a home that he could go back to with pleasure. He determined to keep a strict watch over his conduct, and to preserve his precious privilege of again writing to Geraldine six months hence. That was a long time to wait, but it was comforting to have even this far-off pleasure to look forward to during the long days of torturing regularity of prison life.

The influences that now surrounded him were those of a ceaseless monotony and depression. His days were utterly joyless, hopeless, unbeautiful. His occupations were unmarked by a single deviation from the routine of a machine-like discipline.

Awakened at five o'clock in the morning, he washed in his bucket of water. No sooner was he dressed than a warder came round asking if he wished to see the doctor or the governor. The warder was followed by one of the convict orderlies, who handed into his cell a little brown loaf—the day's allowance of bread. Then came the breakfast of a pint of gruel, sweetened with

treacle—a nauseating mixture that he had difficulty in eating, but which he usually managed to force down.

After breakfast came cell-cleaning. He washed the slate floor with the water he had himself used. At a quarter to seven he was marched with his neighbours in single file to chapel for morning prayers, which were read by one of the school orderlies. At seven the various working gangs were formed in parties on the parade ground. Every man was then carefully searched by the warders, and if any contraband articles were found concealed about his clothing—needles, pins, fragments of string or paper, indeed anything except the one article he was allowed to carry, his handkerchief—they were taken from him. Nothing escaped the searchers' eyes, and woe betide the prisoner who was found in possession of the merest fragment of tobacco!

After this first search of the day, the outdoor gangs were marched out, attended by their armed warders and the civil guard. Those having work inside the prison, such as tailors, shoemakers, laundrymen, and stocking-knitters, remained in the yard for an hour's walking exercise.

At eleven all returned to the parade-ground to be again searched, and half an hour later dinner was served in the cells.

The dinner on three days of the week consisted of three ounces of fat mutton, or the same quantity of boiled meat resembling indiarubber, with a few potatoes. On two other days it was a pint of soup, thickened with vegetables. On Thursdays a pound of solid suet-pudding took the place of meat, and on Sundays bread and cheese.

A rest of forty minutes was allowed after dinner, during which Laurence was glad to read a few pages of his library book. The literature of the prison is, like the suet-pudding, heavy. After dinner the third search of the day was made. Then to work again, until a quarter-past five, when the prisoners, being previously searched for a fourth time, were taken back to their respective cells for their supper of a pint of cocoa with the remains of their day's loaf of bread.

Every night, as the various gangs knocked off work,

a party of thirty or forty men were selected without previous notice and marched off to the bath-house. With this one exception, the routine of every day was invariable. The work, the food, the whole surroundings week by week, never varied. All was weary, monotonous regularity.

But for Laurence Gray a change was imminent.

On the first working day after he had made the acquaintance of Convict 2,000, he noticed that Warder Gannaway was unusually strict and watchful. Laurence, unaccustomed as yet to heavy labour, had suffered many severe pains in his limbs after wheeling about his barrow of large stones in the cuttings of the quarry. On this day the sun was very hot, and the perspiration poured in streams down his bronzed face. Every time he returned with his empty barrow to the cutting, he looked about for the water-carrier, gasping for a few drops of the precious liquid to relieve the burning dryness of his parched throat. By a singular coincidence, the water-can was at those times empty. Twice when he was about to ask for a drink he found the can in the hands of Warder Gannaway.

"All right, Ninety-nine," said Gannaway. "It's all gone this time. Wait till you come back again."

But when Ninety-nine returned it was just as before—there was no water for him.

"None of your grumbling now," said Gannaway gruffly, when Laurence, for the fifth time of his disappointment, ventured a remark. "If you're not satisfied with your job, come here, into the shade and help get down these stones from the top of the slope."

"Do you mean that I am to leave my barrow, sir?" asked Laurence.

"Yes. Go up to the top of the incline there, and move down those larger blocks."

Laurence obeyed, wondering at this change in his work. Climbing the slope, he put his hands to a heavy block of unhewn stone, and, clearing the *debris* from around it, worked it laboriously down, inch by inch, to the level ground, where the empty barrows waited for their loads. The work was hard for his hands, but

it was a change from wheeling the loads in the hot sunshine, and he was not ill-pleased. Besides, he did manage at last to get the water for which he craved.

He had been at his new occupation about an hour, and in another forty minutes or so it would be leaving-off time. He had attacked a very heavy block of stone that was difficult to dislodge. Warder Gannaway now stood above him at the top of the height.

"Get below the stone, man, and pull it over from the top," ordered the warder.

Laurence followed his instructions, and, exerting all his strength, moved the stone and balanced it on one of its jagged points previously to turning it gently over. Suddenly, as he stood bearing the weight up with his strong arms, on which the strained sinews stood out like knotted cords, he thought he saw the warder's foot rest on the top of the stone and give it a violent push. The great block swayed for an instant; Laurence felt his strength give way beneath its overwhelming impetus.

"Look out below, there!" he cried, springing aside and falling over. The heavy block of stone came down upon his left hand. He felt the bones of his fingers crunch and crack. Then, as the stone plunged down the steep incline, he heard a fearful cry of agony.

"Help! help!" shouted several of the convicts.

Laurence rose to his knees and looked down the slope. He saw the block lying on the prostrate body of one of his fellow-prisoners. He slipped down the incline, and with his uninjured hand helped two other men to raise the weight from where it had fallen. Then he looked into the face of the man who had been struck down.

"It's that lag as was near the end of his time," said one of the convicts at his elbow.

And Laurence recognised the man who was in prison for stealing the pears. He was quite dead.

Warder Gannaway had missed his mark.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PURSUING TYRANNY

By the time that the dead man had been raised into an empty wheelbarrow, the great bell of Grimley prison rang out across the intervening stretch of moorland, and the quarry gang left their work, and fell into marching lines.

Laurence Gray, his hand bleeding and giving him agonising pain, walked in the ranks, thinking over the dreadful sight he had just witnessed. Warder Gannaway walked on in front as though nothing unusual had happened; but at the prison gate he waited until Laurence was passing him.

"Thank your stars that you're not in that man's place," he said gruffly. "It was all through your carelessness that the accident happened. Well, what's done can't be helped. You had better go into the hospital ward and get your hand dressed."

"Thank you, sir," said Laurence, too much distressed in mind to think of accusing the warder of having been the real cause of the terrible calamity.

One of the assistant-warders then conducted him into the hospital ward, where the body of Convict 2,000 had already been carried. Laurence sat down on the first prison stool he came to and waited for the doctor. From where he sat he could see two of the hospital orderlies undressing the dead body. The blood-stained clothes were carried away to be cleaned, so that they might serve again for another wearer. Presently the doctor entered, followed by the governor and the chaplain.

Captain Podmore was a typical prison governor, stern, unbending, soldierly, and somewhat fierce of aspect. He was scrupulously neat and even dandified in his attire, and had the air of one who was not to be trifled with.

He walked at once to the body over which the doctor was bending.

"Is he dead?" he asked.

"Quite dead," replied the doctor. "His chest is completely crushed."

Here Laurence came forward, volunteering a detailed account of the affair. But the governor cut him short.

"Never mind details. The thing's done now, and can't be undone. Confounded carelessness on somebody's part, that's clear."

"What are you doing here, my man?" asked the chaplain kindly of Laurence.

Laurence explained about his injured hand. Meanwhile the governor had turned again to the doctor.

"Better get the inquest over and the fellow put underground at once," he said. "Can't have him kept this hot weather."

Laurence was presently ordered to step further into the ward, and he found himself in a large room surrounded by iron gratings, behind which he saw several beds with the sick prisoners lying upon them. The doctor gave him some water to drink, and proceeded to dress his hand with splints and bandages. The operation occupied the best part of an hour. The final bandages were being sewn on when the chaplain, who had gone out, returned again, carrying a cup of hot tea.

"Here, drink this, my man," he said, laying the cup and saucer upon a little table.

"You are very kind, sir," said Laurence gratefully.

For reply, the chaplain smiled kindly as he went away.

"There," said the doctor; "that will do. Come to me again to-morrow morning. You will be saved from work for a week or two."

"Thank you, sir."

As Laurence was going out of the ward, his passage was barred by the men who were attending to the body of the dead convict. Beside it stood a long wooden shell, resembling a packing-case, together with another box filled with dirty sawdust. On the unplaned lid of the larger box a warder was chalking the number, "2,000." This was to be the deceased man's only epitaph. The naked body was laid in the box, which would be filled up with the sawdust by and by when the

inquest should have satisfied all proper requirements in the matter of formality. Then the lid would be nailed on and the curious casket of humanity deposited in the bare and lonely prison cemetery. Laurence foresaw all this with sickness at his heart. In looking round, he did not fail to notice that these ghastly preparations for burial were taking place within the view of several of the infirmary patients.

An assistant-warder reconducted Laurence to his cell. After the horror of that quarry death, and of the scene he had just witnessed, solitude seemed a blessing, an unutterable relief. He thought of the poor man who was dead—killed, when, after nearly five years of unjust, or at least extreme, punishment, he was on the very brink of freedom! He had been full of joy at the prospect of returning to his home, clasping his loved wife again to his breast, learning whether or not the little child, for whose sake he had taken the fateful pears, had died. And now, he was dead—suddenly, by a horrible death—and the humble home would never see his return. His unshrouded body would soon be thrust into a nameless grave, and no one—not even his nearest and dearest—would ever learn the truth concerning his fate.

And all for the taking of a few poor pears to ease the throat of his suffering child!

At the thought of the pity and the sadness of it, Laurence gave a great sob—dry, tearless, but laden with his whole soul's agonised protest. In his utter loneliness, in his great need for comfort, he sought Geraldine's letter. That fragile sheet of paper was like a living thing to him, a perpetual well-spring of human love and sympathy in the parched desert of his present bitter lot. Eagerly he sought it in its sacred place between the leaves of the Bible. It was strangely difficult to find this time. He opened the Bible feverishly, turning the thin pages with his uninjured hand, while drops of dread came out upon his forehead. At last he staggered backward with a hoarse cry.

The letter was gone!

CHAPTER XIV

THE SERPENT AND THE DOVE

No one seeing Ralph Vickers as he walked down Regent Street on a certain July morning would have imagined that he was in any way preoccupied or perplexed. His handsome dark face was unclouded, and his step was light and free. With his faultless clothes and easy distinguished bearing, he looked aristocratic to the finger-tips; and more than one girl, as she glanced at him in passing, thought what an ideal lover he would make, and perhaps carried his image mirrored for a time in her mind.

But inwardly he was much disturbed. Since his journey to Grimley he had been revelling in the thought that Laurence Gray was tortured, crushed, doomed. Occasional newspapers sent by Warder Gannaway tacitly informed him that his wishes regarding Convict 99 were being carried out. So far, this was satisfactory. But now Gannaway had asked him for more money. The dishonest warder's application was inconveniently speedy; but it could not be disregarded. He must be satisfied somehow.

Vickers was just thinking that he must ask Geraldine Lucas for the necessary money, when his eyes were attracted by a victoria that was approaching up the handsome thoroughfare. There was one lady seated in it, and he knew in an instant that it was Geraldine herself. No other woman had that faultless poise of the head, that charming dignity and grace of attitude. As the carriage drew near, he stepped forward so that she might see him. The carriage drew up beside the kerb.

"I am so glad to have met you," said Geraldine, after responding to his courteous greetings. "I wanted to speak to you."

She glanced towards the coachman, and Vickers understood. She wanted to speak to him about Laurence Gray, and was wondering if the servant would overhear. For a moment a cold, snake-like anger rose up in Vickers's heart at the thought that but for Laurence Gray she

would have driven past him with the merest cold salute. But he crushed the resentful feelings, and called a seductive smile to his lips as she turned her violet-grey eyes again upon him.

"I think we can talk here, safely, if we speak low," she said.

The fuller revelation of her stately grace as she moved on her cushions in order to lean closer towards him made his passion-thrilled blood run quicker in his veins. Her long fawn-coloured cloak showed the perfect moulding of her figure, and above it her proud, fair head and flower-like face rose with a rare poetic beauty that caught and held the eyes of all who passed her.

Vickers noted, too, how the sweet summer air had brought an added richness to her cheeks, a tender transparency to her fair skin. Oh, what delight, what triumph it would be to win this lovely woman for his own, to share with her her wealth, and to know that the man who disputed her with him was dead!

"I told you in my letter," he began, "how I got on at Grimley."

She nodded.

"Yes. But I want to know more. A letter does not satisfy an eager heart like mine." She smiled, and went on: "You said you saw the warder; what kind of a man is he?"

"A very good fellow. Not as honest as he might be, perhaps, or he wouldn't let us get over him so. But he's the sort of man who can be trusted, if only for the money's sake, to do everything he promises to do."

"And he promised to be good to Laurence—to be kind?"

"To be as kind as he dared be."

Geraldine clasped her hands under the folds of her cloak.

"Oh, I thank Heaven that we have been able to do this!" she breathed.

Then she fixed her beautiful serious eyes on Vickers's face.

"You are sure that the plan is succeeding?"

"Quite sure," Vickers answered. "I have had

several assurances from the warder that things are going on very well indeed. And only this morning I had a letter from him—I was thinking of it as I was walking down here, before I saw you—in which he says that Laurence is being so well treated that he himself noticed the change, and made a remark about it. The warder told him—as I had directed him to do—that it was through a lady's intercession."

A light like the breaking of dawn over a drear landscape came upon Geraldine's face.

"So he knows!" she cried with subdued gladness. "He has proof of my continued love!"

"The best proof," replied Vickers. "You have become to him a protecting angel."

Vickers's command of his voice and features was wonderful. No one studying his expression now would have doubted that he spoke truth.

"Have you that letter with you?" Geraldine asked suddenly. "I should like to see it."

Vickers was momentarily taken aback. He had not expected this. But he answered immediately, with an assumed regret:—

"I am very sorry to say that I have burnt it. I thought it prudent to do so, as there would be danger in its falling by any accident into wrong hands, more especially as it contained an application for money."

Geraldine was displeased. She very naturally thought that Vickers had acted strangely in forgetting her right to see a letter concerning Laurence in referring to this matter in which she was the principal and Vickers only the instrument. She accepted his excuse, however. The joy of hearing that Laurence was happier was more than enough to cover a thousand petty grievances such as this.

"You say there was an application for money?" she proceeded, just as Vickers was framing his own request for the gold wherewith to carry out his treachery. "I will send you some more this evening. You shall have all that is necessary, even if I have to sacrifice my jewellery. You have comforted me exceedingly," she added, as she gave him her hand. "I don't feel now that Laurence is far away, although, indeed, I never have

felt that. He is so constantly in my heart that I sometimes fancy he is himself beside me. Even this morning I was thinking of him so that he seemed to be actually here sitting with me "

Ralph Vickers smiled an answer to her smile, but he bit his lip sharply as her carriage drove away.

CHAPTER XV

RENEWED MISTRUST

THAT evening, at Fenton Court, as Geraldine and her father were at dinner together, Mr. Lucas said, not unkindly:

"I grieve to tell you, my child, that my opinion of Laurence Gray is changing. The examination of our books between the January audit and the date of Laurence's arrest shows further embezzlements amounting to a considerable sum, while since his removal from the office the accounts have been absolutely correct. These facts speak volumes, Geraldine."

"There must be some mistake, father," answered the true-hearted girl firmly: "I would stake my life that Laurence is as innocent of these thefts as he is of the crime for which he is now suffering unjust punishment."

Mr. Lucas looked at her with tender sadness.

"For your sake, my child, I would like to believe so too. A little while ago my faith in Laurence was as strong as yours; but the facts are too clear against him. Even Mr. Vickers has been obliged to accept his guilt at last, although for friendship's sake he put off conviction as long as he could."

Geraldine started and grew pale.

"Mr. Vickers believed that Laurence embezzled?" she cried.

"Certainly," replied her father; "it was he who pointed the matter out to me. He seemed greatly distressed about it. He had doubted, he said, as long as it was possible to doubt, but certainty at last was unavoidable. He is a very good fellow, is Ralph Vickers.

I must say, my dear child, that I wish it had been he who had won your affection instead of the other one."

Mr. Lucas sighed. Geraldine was silent, struggling with the bitter knowledge that even her dear father had forsaken her in her grief, and that henceforth her battle against fate for love and happiness must be fought alone.

"I have to-day made Vickers manager," proceeded Mr. Lucas presently. "The man who had taken Gray's place did not suit, and I am glad of the chance of showing young Ralph how thoroughly I appreciate his upright and manly character."

Geraldine made no remark of either approval or disapproval; but she felt the old vague distrust of Ralph Vickers spring up again in her mind.

This feeling was increased by something that happened on the following morning. As she was going out alone for an early walk, she encountered James Stinchcombe, the office-boy, who had been sent with a message to Mr. Lucas.

"Please, miss," said James, "I've got a message for you."

"For me?" said Geraldine.

"Yass. Mr. Vickers, 'e ses to me, 'James, if yer sees Miss Lucas abart Fent'n Court, tell 'er as the letter's been sent orf all right.'"

"What letter?" asked Geraldine, perplexed at first.

"Oh, I d'now," said the boy. "I reckoned as 'ow you'd know all abart it. Mr. Vickers, 'e's fond o sending of messages as is like riddles. But if you arst me, miss, why, I thinks as p'raps a letter as 'e 'id under 'is ledger yasterd'y arternoon I were in 'is orffice when the gov'nor—when Mr. Lucas call'd 'im art all of a sudden. Mr. Vickers sent me art before 'im, but when 'e were in the gov'ner's room I goes back, don't yer know, and looks wot it was 'e'd shoved away so sudden. I didn't mean no offence to *you* miss. I didn't know as you'd bin a-givin' 'im letters to send to 'im wot's—you know —to Mr. Gray."

"Mr. Gray!" exclaimed Geraldine. "What do you mean, boy? Do you say that Mr. Vickers had a letter of *mine*—in *my* writing?"

"Well, leastways, it were in a lady's handwriting, and the piper 'ad 'Fenton Court, 'Ampstead,' printed in blue on it No offence, miss, I ain't a-goin' to say anythin' abart it, and I asks yer pardon"

But Geraldine interrupted, startled at the boy's incomprehensible information.

"You say that the letter you saw was addressed to Mr. Gray?"

"Yass," and even he felt a little shyness as he answered · "It began 'My dearest Laurence.'"

"Do you think you could manage to get that letter by some means and bring it to me?"

"But Mr Vickers 'ave sent it away, miss."

"No, it was not that one," said Geraldine "Try to get the one you saw in my handwriting, and post it to me here. I will reward you well for it"

"Right you are, miss, I'll 'ave a try for it. If I sits up 'arf the night a plannin' of o'w I'm to git it, git it I will, miss Mr Vickers is fly, 'e is; but 'e ain't more fly than me, I lay"

Two days later Geraldine received a letter in a boy's hand. It was from James Stinchcombe and it stated that though he had tried in all manner of ways he had not succeeded in finding the letter he had mentioned. He believed it had been destroyed. But he added that he could swear he had seen it

Geraldine was restless with doubt and suspense. If the boy spoke truth, as she half believed, what part was Ralph Vickers playing? What could be the meaning of his possessing the letter that she had written to Laurence Gray?

CHAPTER XVI

CHECKMATE!

RALPH VICKERS was in high spirits. He was dining at Fenton Court, and Mr. Lucas was showing him a degree of attention that plainly marked the great advance he had lately made in his employer's esteem. It was true that Geraldine was colder to him than usual, but that

did not greatly lessen the satisfaction he felt in having so thoroughly secured her father's favour. He imagined that Geraldine's coldness proceeded only from her wish that her father should not suspect her secret communication with him on Laurence Gray's behalf.

Mr. Lucas, meanwhile, was privately thinking that his daughter did not show enough cordiality to this handsome man who talked so charmingly, and looked at her with adoration in his eyes. The cheery old gentleman fancied that his own presence was a stumbling-block between them. Perhaps, if he left them alone for a little while, Vickers would be able with his clever tongue to stir Geraldine to interest and warmth.

So, shortly after coffee had been served, the well-intentioned father announced that he had a letter to write in his study, and, making his excuses, he left the drawing-room.

This was an opportunity that Vickers had hoped for, yet scarcely dared to expect. His dark face glowed with satisfaction as he crossed the room to where Geraldine sat in a low chair near the now fireless and fern-filled hearth. To be alone with her made his pulses throb. And yet he did not scruple to deceive her.

"I am glad of this chance of speaking to you," he began softly. "I wanted to tell you that there is good news of Laurence—that your protection is still ensuring him comfort and kind treatment."

"Have you had a letter?" asked Geraldine quickly.

"No," was Vickers's suave reply. He remembered that on the last occasion of his appeal for money she had wanted to see the letter. He must guard against such a request this time.

"No, not a letter," he went on, "only a newspaper. I told the warder that unless he had anything very particular to say he was to communicate with me by means of signs on newspapers. This time he informs me that Laurence is in good health and spirits. He also puts the red ink cross—a sign that he expects more money. Considering the risk he runs, I suppose he deserves it."

"Certainly he deserves it," said Geraldine; "and

if you will give me his name and address outside the prison, I will give it to him."

Vickers started at these unexpected words.

"*You*—give it to him!" he exclaimed lightly, and yet with a faint thrill of anxiety in his tone.

"Yes," she replied. "I am going down to Grimley to see Laurence in a few days' time."

An inward trembling shook Ralph Vickers's nerves, and the blood ebbed away from his face. He had not counted on such a move as this. It must be prevented somehow. And yet she must not see that he dreaded it.

He controlled himself to meet the searching of those lovely eyes of hers, that had for him now the coldness of gems rather than the tender softness of the violet. Something in their look told him that her old doubt and dislike of him had revived, and a resentful disappointment filled him with bitterness. But he braced himself to fight against the threatened danger.

"I am afraid you will find it impossible to see him," he said, with assumed regret.

"I have obtained an order to do so," she returned. "Prisoners are permitted to receive visitors at certain intervals. In any case, I am determined to make the attempt."

"Does Mr. Lucas approve?" Vickers asked, with a fleeting gleam of malignity in his sombre eyes.

She looked at him over the edge of her dainty fan.

"That is a matter entirely between my father and myself," she answered, with dignity.

Rage sent the dark red blood in a torrent to his cheeks and brow. But secret dread clutched like a vulture at his heart. Nevertheless, he kept his soft seductive smile.

"You are cruel to Laurence. Passionately though he must long for a sight of your face, he cannot wish to be seen by you as he is now—close-shaven, degraded, with the broad-arrow mark upon his rough prison clothes."

She smiled coldly.

"Do not be disturbed on his account. He will soon know how little I care for those outward things. It is enough for me that he has not the broad-arrow mark on his heart, as many have whom we meet day by day."

She rose in all the dignity of her graceful beauty, and moved across the room towards the conservatory, where the air was cooler. Without turning his head, Vickers listened to the soft *susurrus* of her skirts of creamy silk and billowing lace. He hated her and worshipped her at once.

The broad-arrow mark on the heart? What did she mean by that? What did she suspect? Surely not the truth about the crime?

A cold perspiration started out upon his delicate white brow. But in the next moment he had recovered himself, and was smiling at his own fears. She had meant nothing, suspected nothing; the words had only been chance ones. It was his secret guilt, not her intention, that had given them their peculiar fitness.

The soft murmur of her skirts came again. She was re-crossing the room towards him. He rose and stood before her, with his subtle fascination of look and manner, that might well have enthralled the heart of any woman not steeled against him by another love.

"Kindly give me the warder's name and address," she said, with an imperiousness that made the request a command; "then I shall not trouble you for any further help."

"In what have I been so unfortunate as to offend you?" asked Vickers, with assumed humility.

"We will not discuss that," rejoined Geraldine. "Give me the address I ask for."

He shook his head, with a kind of tender regret.

"I cannot."

Geraldine recoiled a few steps.

"You are afraid?" she cried, in mingled scorn and indignation.

"I am afraid for what may come of it," Vickers said coolly. "I promised the warder that no living soul but myself should ever know his name in connection with this affair, and I must keep my word. It is a dangerous business for him at the best, and it would be doubly dangerous if you were to persist in your intention of taking an active part in it. I can disguise myself, and can penetrate into places where your sex and your

delicacy would never permit you to go—places where, even if you should overcome all scruples and venture into them, your beauty and fine clothing would make you too conspicuous. I am better fitted for acting in this matter than you. And I am sure that if Mr. Lucas knew the facts he would uphold me in what I say."

Geraldine looked at him closely.

"You are sheltering yourself behind my father's authority," she said suspiciously. "And what if I promise you that I will never seek this warder at Grimley, but will only write to him from here—would you tell me his name then?"

Again Vickers shook his head.

"I told you I promised him never to reveal it."

Geraldine smiled at him—a smile of unbelief that goaded him to inward fear and fury.

"You doubt me?" he cried reproachfully.

"I do," she answered, with calm truthfulness. "There is no reason why you should withhold that name from me. It is I who am the principal in this matter, not you."

She moved to and fro over the luxurious carpet, thinking. Then again she stopped before the undetected murderer, who was keeping his place among honest men at the cost of her lover's anguish."

"Listen, Mr. Vickers," she said. "I am going to Grimley, as I have told you, to visit Laurence. That will be in three days' time. When I have seen Laurence and heard from his own lips that his condition has been improved by your intercession, then I will give you more money to transmit to the warder in the usual way. Until then I must refuse to trust you."

Ralph Vickers paled with rage and secret terror. He felt, that, had he dared, he could have killed her as she stood there before him—ay, killed her as cruelly and as swiftly as he had killed Charles Kesteven. And yet her beauty dazzled him, overcame his malignant hatred, made him covet her as the only thing in all the world that he cared to win.

Later in the evening he walked home from Fenton Court, baffled, perplexed, fear-stricken. Was his treachery about to be discovered?

For a moment he thought of using his influence with Mr. Lucas to prevent him from taking his daughter to Grimley. But he soon realised that this hope was vain. His word carried weight with the kind-hearted old merchant, but the wishes of his dear child would be weightier still.

Then suddenly an idea flashed on Vickers, bringing certain relief. If Laurence Gray had been ill-treated as Warder Gannaway averred, and had rebelled in consequence, he must have lost all privileges, and as a result would not be permitted to see any visitors whatsoever. If Geraldine went to Grimley she would go in vain! The very persecution of which Laurence had to complain cut him off from opportunity of complaint.

Vickers, on reaching his room, gathered together what money he had and sent it to Gannaway with a letter, in which he commanded him not to relax for a single day his harshness towards Convict 99. The letter was type-written. Vickers was far too clever to risk possible detection by handwriting.

He had now but one more difficulty to face. But that was a serious one. Where should he get money wherewith to continue the bribery? Geraldine would give him no more unless he gave her proof of the faithfulness of his trust. And he would need a large sum by and by as the reward for Laurence Gray's premature death.

CHAPTER XVII

THE CROWNING SORROW

On the night after the disappearance of his treasured letter, Laurence Gray did not sleep a single instant. It was partly the pain from his wounded hand that kept him awake; but more than all, it was bitter mental anguish. When Gannaway had served him his supper, Laurence had accused him of taking the letter, to which the warder had replied with a savage and abusive denial. In the morning Laurence had put his broom outside his door as a sign that he wanted to see the governor, and on the governor's arrival he had complained to

him of the theft of his letter, and stated his suspicions of the warder. But in reply to Captain Podmore's questioning Gannaway had stoutly denied having touched the "precious document," or even known where it was kept. As a prisoner's word is never, under any circumstances, taken against an official's, the governor had merely shrugged his shoulders, and turned away, remarking drily that No. 99 must have swallowed his letter himself.

Little did Laurence dream that almost at that same moment his missing treasure—Geraldine's cherished message—sent by Gannaway, was being delivered by the first post to Ralph Vickers.

His hand was now daily getting better. Once a day the doctor, accompanied by the apothecary, came round to see him in his cell. Their visit always took place during the dinner-hour, and whatever medicine was given had to be taken at once, between mouthfuls of his food. Sometimes, unless he had prepared something to receive it, the evil-smelling ointment given him by the hurrying doctor would be dabbed down on the side of his tin dinner-plate. Then Laurence, accustomed as he had been to refinement and cleanliness, would turn sick, and could eat no more.

Meanwhile, the persecutions of the warder continued. While Laurence's hand was bad, and he could not get out with the quarry-gang, Gannaway was perforce baffled during the day. But in the evening and the early morning he made Laurence pay the penalty of this respite. His ingenious system of constant worrying must have cost him a good deal of planning. Every petty torment that the low cunning of an ignorant and greedy man could devise he inflicted on his innocent victim, whose gentlemanhood held him patient under tyranny that would have goaded an ordinary convict to furious self-defence. Laurence might have acted differently had he suspected the warder of personal ill-will against him—had he guessed that Gannaway was the hired tool of an outside enemy. But as it was, he thought he was being treated only as the rest of the convicts were treated—strictly in accordance with the

prison rules—and he submitted to these cruelties as a necessary part of the great affliction which Fate had dealt out to him.

But worse was yet to come. One morning, when Laurence was cleaning his cell, he found, stuck in under the flaps of his little table, a sharp and formidable-looking weapon of steel, which he quickly recognised to be one of the blades of a pair of large shears, such as those used in the tailors' shop of the prison He started back in astonishment, gazing at the blade. How came it there? Who had brought it and hidden it so between the joints of the table? He could have sworn it was not there on the day before.

Although at imminent risk of being disturbed, since now was the time for the cell doors to be flung open, and for the prisoners to commence washing their portion of the gallery floor, Laurence stood with the blade in his hand. A suspicion entered his brain that it had been placed in his cell with the deliberate object of tempting him to suicide. It had been newly sharpened at the point, and it offered an easy death, such as many a convict whom he had spoken to hourly longed for. Many a poor wretch, who was planning to cut short his life with the edge of a button sharpened on his cell floor, or with a rusty nail, would have leapt at such a chance as was offered by this weapon. As by a flash, Laurence now remembered how often Gannaway's abusive talk to him had contained suggestions of suicide, such as "If this 'ere life isn't good enough for the likes of you, why d'you keep going on in it?" or, "If I was such a miserable wretch as you, I'd kill myself, that I would!"

But Laurence would not kill himself. Not for a single instant had the hideous thought lingered in his mind. Self-murder might be well enough for the cowardly and the guilty; but not for a brave man whose honour and conscience were stainless, and who, if there were justice in either heaven or earth, would assuredly ere long be free. To kill himself—while Geraldine lived and loved him! Such an act would be madness; and even had there been no Geraldine, if the whole world were as dark for him as was the inside of those

prison walls, yet the memory of his mother would have stayed his despairing hand, and the Lancashire endurance in him would have borne him through until God sent the end of His own will.

What was he to do with the dangerous implement? The discovery of it in his cell by any of the warders meant that he would have to pay a bitter penalty. To give it up voluntarily to Gannaway would be as dangerous as keeping it concealed, for Gannaway had never yet believed him. He resolved to wait till dinner-time, and then ask for the governor, and explain the facts to him. Meanwhile he carefully hid the blade again in the place where he had found it, and went out to the light work that had lately been allotted him of attending to the stove in the tailors' shop. He little dreamed what that delay would cost him.

At dinner-time, when he returned to his cell, the blade was gone. Scarcely had he recovered from his surprise at this discovery, when a warder—not Gannaway—summoned him to the governor's presence.

The governor was seated in a little room like an office, with the chief warder at his right hand, and Warder Gannaway standing deferentially near by. Laurence was placed in a kind of cage, a space divided off from the rest of the room by thick iron bars. He saw the missing shear-blade lying on the table before the governor.

"Number-Ninety-nine," said the governor, lifting the weapon, "this blade has been found in your cell. You know that the possession of such a thing as this is an offence against the bye-laws of the prison, and renders you liable to severe punishment."

"If you please, sir," cried Laurence, "I had nothing to do with the bringing of that blade into my cell. I found it there this morning when I got up, and I left it there, meaning to give it to you at the dinner hour. But it seems that while I was out of my cell the man who put it there took it away again."

The governor's fierce moustaches seemed to bristle in contemptuous disbelief.

"Pooh! pooh!" he retorted sharply. "I've heard that sort of tale before. Who do you think is likely

to hide anything in your cell? I think it far more probable that what Warder Gannaway suspects is true—that you secreted this weapon in order to make a dastardly attack upon him. Ever since your ridiculous suspicions about the taking of your letter, your conduct towards him has been violent, and your language abusive. I sentence you to seven days in a dark cell, and the loss of forty-eight marks."

Laurence caught desperately at the bars in front of him. The dark cells! Prisoners who had been in them said that hell itself could scarcely be worse.

Oh, the agony of those seven days! The agony of darkness—a darkness so thick as to be almost palpable—horrible, suffocating. the agony of solitude, of utter desolation and abandonment such as make the strongest mind rock in the balance between sanity and madness, and force from out the bravest heart wild prayers for death! And lastly, the agony of time—of moments that are dragging hours, of hours that stretch to centuries.

Stripped of his outer clothing, and deprived of every article or utensil that might aid him in a possible attempt at self-murder, Laurence heard the heavy door clang to, and found himself in a darkness that was as the darkness of the tomb. His feet that were covered only by his socks at once felt the damp coldness of the stone floor. The cell was empty of furniture saving only a stool and a plank bed.

At first he neither ate nor drank the bread and water that were given to him, but fought with his despair, turning and tossing throughout the night on his hard plank bed of punishment, his head throbbing, his brain fevered and his weary limbs stiff with cold under the miserable coverlets, for although it was still summer-time the cell was like a refrigerator.

The only diet allowed him for the first three days was half a pound of dry bread morning and evening, with as much cold water as he wished to take. On the fourth day a dish of thin gruel was added. The opening of the trap-door for the passing in of this food formed the sole diversion that was permitted For the rest of the time Laurence could only lie upon his plank, pace

the few feet of the floor, or crouch, motionless, in a corner, thinking. A man must have a wonderfully well-balanced and cultivated mind who can find resource in the pleasures of fancy under such conditions.

Laurence Gray, undistracted by outward light, saw inward things more clearly. He went over all the incidents of Charles Kesteven's murder as he remembered them, striving to find a clue, a suggestion that should lead him to the truth. He assured himself passionately that if he were only free he would certainly discover and track down the perpetrator of the crime whose bitter weight of punishment had fallen unjustly upon himself.

He was a changed man when he came forth from the dark cell. The semi-starvation had thinned him, weakened the splendid fibre of his limbs, and the slow, numbing torture of blackness and solitude had brought a wild look into his eyes. His face was marble-like in its deadly pallor, but it had not even yet lost its nobility.

It was at dinner-time when he was taken back to his old cell. He was eating his portion of fat boiled mutton when his door opened and the prison chaplain entered. Laurence was glad to see his reverend face. There was something of comfort in the presence of this good old clergyman.

Laurence rose and offered his wooden stool but the chaplain declined it.

"No, no," he said kindly, "sit down. You look weak and ill. I will stand." Then he added with sorrowful tenderness: "I was deeply grieved to hear of your punishment."

"It was wrongfully given," cried Laurence passionately. "I knew nothing of the thing they accused me of having hidden. Somebody else must have brought it into my cell."

The chaplain looked perplexed and troubled. It was not often that a convict's protestations of innocence were worthy of belief, and yet, in spite of himself, he felt inclined to believe Laurence now.

"If that is so," he said gravely, "pray to God for strength to forgive the man who wronged you. Ask

God to forgive him, too; for his guilt is heavier with all the weight of your suffering. And guilt without punishment is harder far, could we but see things truly, than punishment without guilt. The man whose soul is stainless is only ennobled and purified by unjust suffering."

The wild look died out of Laurence's eyes. He drew a deep breath of relief.

"The worst of such punishment is that it sometimes brings severer ones in its train," pursued the chaplain. "You lose your marks, and consequently your privileges. For instance, yesterday a visitor called with an order to see you. But, because of your temporary loss of good-conduct marks, she had to be sent away again."

Laurence sprang up, letting his dinner-tin fall on the bare slate floor.

"She! Was it a lady?" he cried.

"Yes."

"And she was sent away—told that I could not see her because I was undergoing punishment for ill-conduct?"

"I am afraid so."

"Oh! oh!" cried Laurence, swaying for a moment uncertainly, as though a physical blow had been dealt him. He locked his hands together hard, and then flung them wildly above his head. "Oh, my God, have pity on me! have pity on me!"

He fell on his knees on the bare floor, and, flinging his arms across the stool, leaned his head upon them and sobbed bitterly—dry, tearless, convulsive sobs that shook his whole frame.

Tears came into the white-haired chaplain's eyes. It was terrible and pitiful to see that strong man in his prison clothes, with the hideous black arrow marked upon them, kneeling there, shaking like a leaf with violent grief.

Laurence had forgotten that he was not alone. But presently he found the chaplain kneeling at his side, and heard his comforting voice.

"Ask God for help to bear. He will help you. No suffering human creature ever yet called to Him in vain."

"Ah, you do not know," sobbed Laurence brokenly.

"She was all I had in the world—all, all! No father, no mother—no one but her. And she loved me, trusted me through it all. Ten years in that dark cell would not have hurt me so much as this—that she should come to see me, and should hear that I was in disgrace."

"Pray God to set it right," murmured the chaplain. "He can and He will."

"At least," cried Laurence, "I can write to her. It will soon be six months since I wrote the last letter. I can write. What! does my punishment take away that privilege, too?"

He had read the answer in the good clergyman's face. With a dull cry he sank down upon the floor, and lay there sobbing. The bell for the return to work resounded through the echoing iron walls.

CHAPTER XVIII

DEADLY NIGHTSHADE

ONE evening when Laurence was suffering from an unusually bitter instance of Gannaway's tyranny, Warder O'Reilly looked in upon him.

"My bhoy, look here," he said, "it's meself that believes that Gannaway's just being paid by somebody outside the prison to put the screw on yez. He niver treated any one so devilish bad before, at all, at all. Ay, and it's amazin' flush of the rhino he's been ever since yez came to live wid us at Grimley, me bhoy. Don't say nowt about it, ye mind now; but kape yer eye on him, and yez'll see. Faith, and it's just bribed he's been."

These words sank deep in Laurence's mind. He pondered over them day and night. Since he had heard of Geraldine's fruitless visit, his character seemed to have altered. Deadened to all outward things by his gnawing heart-anguish, he had grown reckless, and had given Gannaway many an opportunity for getting him into trouble. So merciless was the warder now become, that but for the ministrations of the good chaplain Laurence's life in prison would have been unbearable.

But this suggestion of O'Reilly's made him his former self again. It threw a sudden light upon his path, where before all had been darkness. Everything that had happened to him, viewed by this light took a new aspect, and pointed clearly to an outside enemy. But who was that enemy?

He asked himself first who had any motive for injuring him. There was but one man possible, and that was Ralph Vickers, whose openly-declared love for Geraldine made it likely that he would rejoice at the degradation of his successful rival. Yet even Vickers had been his friend! Laurence remembered now how often he had playfully rebuked Geraldine for her groundless mistrust of him. But that mistrust of hers weighed with him now. He saw it no longer as feminine caprice, but as true insight, a Heaven-sent warning against the villain who was to wreck her happiness.

The embezzlements must have been done by Vickers. And, great Heaven! was it possible that the crime also had been committed by him to cover those embezzlements—to silence the voice of Charles Kesteven, who was about to make the disclosure of the office accounts? And, this done, was it Vickers who had falsified the accounts, transferring the deficiencies from his own books to those of his innocent friend?

These questionings, which, ever since the time of his first examination by the magistrate, had been vaguely haunting him, now became vivid probabilities. His former doubts amounted now almost to certainties.

From the moment when this conviction presented itself, Laurence Gray resolved to make his escape from Grimley. The consciousness of his own innocence took away all wrong from the act. He might fail; but the attempt was worth trying. If he did fail, his hardships could scarcely be increased. If he succeeded, he would prove his innocence and that other's guilt, would redeem his life, redeem Geraldine—oh, the sweetness of that last hope!

Unceasingly, day and night, he pondered how his escape should be made. He saw with his own eyes, as well as heard from what the other lags told him, how

terribly difficult a thing it was to get away from a convict prison. Even to venture the attempt required a degree of daring of which only the most desperate and determined man could be capable.

Laurence quickly saw that escape from inside the prison was absolutely impossible. His only chance lay in profiting by a moment in which the guards' eyes might be off him during the outdoor work, and then trusting to his swiftness of foot.

On account of the lingering weakness of his hand he had for a time been occupied in the tailors' shop, minding the pressing-irons at the stove, but when his hand was well he was to be sent again to outdoor labour. He asked to be put with a clearing gang instead of with the quarrymen, and his request was granted. He had hoped by this chance to avoid Gannaway, but he soon learned that his enemy had followed him even here. His new gang was engaged in clearing a tract of waste land previous to bringing it under cultivation. This piece of land was at a considerable distance from the prison, for year by year the penal colony thrust its reclaiming hands farther out into the desolate wilds that lay around it. Here it was a far-stretching waste of tangled brambles, with patches of coarse grass, and about a quarter of a mile below was the river, narrow at this point, but deep.

Every day when he went out, Laurence carefully, but furtively, reconnoitred the ground. Covert talk about escape is frequent among convicts, and an old lag had once told him that some years before a convict working at gardening farther up by the prison had at a happy moment made a run for it, and would have got clean off if he had been a swimmer, but the river stopped him, and while he was searching for a fording-place he was recaptured.

Laurence almost smiled to himself now as he thought that the river would have no power to stop him. He had been a clever swimmer from his boyhood. He readily resolved that should he ever have the chance he would swim along with the stream, and not attempt to cross direct, and if the warders' bullets should be sent after

him, he would swim under water and so escape them. His greatest danger, however, lay in his prison clothing and his cropped head. These make it well-nigh impossible for a convict to escape very far, and there is a standing reward of £3 for the capture of an escaping prisoner. To this the prison governor often adds a liberal gratuity, as he has to forfeit £500 for every man who escapes. Consequently the whole countryside is always on the outlook for men with cropped heads and the broad-arrow mark.

Laurence knew this, and was tormented with the fear of final recapture. But there was no help for it. He must be bold and trust to his fate. He was resolved now, and he bided his time, waiting for his chance.

One morning, while his gang were at work, the man next him—a middle-aged man, doing five years for burglary—carelessly picked some berries that were growing among the tangled furze, and was about to put them in his mouth, when an old convict, whom Laurence recognised as his acquaintance, the ex-doctor from Mayfair, caught his hand, saying excitedly:

"What are you up to, man? Those berries are rank poison—the *atropa belladonna*—one of the deadliest poisons in the world."

"Ugh!" muttered the ex-burglar, flinging the black berries away. "Poison, eh? Well, I don't want to kick the bucket yet, mate. Got a few more cribs to crack before then," and he went on with his work.

Laurence observed that the attention of another of the gang had been arrested by the mention of poison, a young lag who was in for twenty years for manslaughter. The young man stepped forward to examine the berries that his companion had thrown away, and day after day he continued to hover near the bush from which they had been gathered.

Laurence Gray was too deeply absorbed in his own plans to seek to penetrate his fellow-prisoner's intentions. He did not dream that the fulfilment of those intentions would bring him the opportunity he himself waited for.

CHAPTER XIX

FOR LIBERTY AND LOVE

The sixth morning after the five-year man's careless picking of the deadly nightshade berries dawned foggy, and it was at first thought that the outdoor gangs would not be allowed to go beyond the prison walls. But after a while the fog cleared away, and they went out as usual. Only a slight ground mist lingered in the raw air, clinging to the undulations of the desolate land.

But even this slight mist was enough to help one of the convicts to the death he desired. Unseen by the warders or the civil guards, unnoticed also by Laurence Gray, the young lag who was doing his twenty years for manslaughter crept up to the brambles over which the belladonna trailed, and began to eat the fatal black berries with a wild eagerness that would have been terrible for any human eye to behold. When he had eaten a large quantity of them, he went back to the rest of the gang with a strange smile on his face.

Soon afterwards Laurence observed—although without suspecting the dreadful cause of it—that he was working with remarkable speed and vigour. His eyes had a glassy brightness, two red spots burned in his cheeks, and his whole body seemed to have been suddenly endowed with marvellous strength. He laboured on the hard ground with herculean force. The overlooking warders approved, and the rest of the gang wondered, little thinking that it was the last time he would work among them.

The fog, which had been rolling up again, began to thicken ominously. Laurence glanced about him. Presently, if the fog continued, he might make his long-meditated attempt at escape. But he must wait for a favourable moment. His heart sank a little as he observed the civil guard were gradually closing in around the prisoners.

He worked on unceasingly, yet with his whole attention concentrated upon the movements of the warders. Once, on looking up, he caught Gannaway's eye fixed

curiously upon him. A thrill ran through his veins. Did the tyrannous warder suspect anything. Could he read his thoughts ?

He little guessed that Gannaway would even have suggested escape to him if he only dared, in order that he might shoot him down and win his reward from Ralph Vickers.

The fog grew denser. Laurence dreaded at every moment to hear the great bell of the prison ringing to call the convicts in. The warders pressed in about the gangs. But suddenly there was a commotion; shriek after shriek rent the heavy air.

The man who had eaten the deadly nightshade was in the convulsions of death !

Warders and convicts alike were seized with consternation. Now was the time for escape.

Laurence gave a look around, assured himself that even Gannaway had turned aside. Stealthily he crept away from the ranks, looked round again to make sure that he was not being watched, and then darted off towards the river.

Away—away, over the wild waste land, down into the valley he ran with all his speed, making a zigzag course, lest any of the guards, seeing him, should fire their rifles. Some of the convicts had seen him start off, but they said no word. And in the very instant of his flight the prison-bell clanged out its summons to return.

But scarcely had its first harsh note rung through the ever-thickening air when Laurence, running madly down the slope, heard a warder's shrill whistle. His flight had been discovered; the whistle was the sound of the alarm!

He trusted to the fog to screen him. But already he could hear the footsteps of his pursuers. The fog would not screen him from them.

A moment later a shot whizzed through the air, striking him sharply. He stumbled and fell. The footsteps came nearer and nearer to him. He heard Gannaway's voice, and then darkness closed over his quivering senses.

On the following day Ralph Vickers received a letter

from Warder Gannaway containing this announcement:
"Shot in trying to escape."

Below these words was a red ink cross.

Vickers, never doubting that his victim was dead, leaned back in his chair with a deep-drawn breath of relief.

"I am safe at last," he muttered to himself triumphantly. "Safe at last!"

CHAPTER XX

THE INFIRMARY WARD

When Laurence Gray recovered consciousness he found himself lying upon a stretcher in the prison infirmary. He felt a dull aching in his side and back. He was faint from loss of blood, but he quickly realised that he had been trying to escape, and that his attempt had failed. Despair crept over him at the recollection. He knew that his condition, even if he should recover from the shot-wound that he had received, would now be worse than ever, that his punishment would be far more terrible than had been all the tyranny of Gannaway, and all the mental and physical torture that he had hitherto endured.

Two of the infirmary orderlies were undressing him. The doctor meanwhile was examining the dead convict who had eaten the poisonous berries, but finding that the suicide was beyond medical aid, he now came to Laurence, and, turning him over, made an examination of his wound. Gannaway's bullet had entered his left side. Fortunately for Laurence it had glanced aside after striking one of the ribs, and no vital organ was seriously injured. But Warder Gannaway, on seeing the doctor probing the wound, did not for a moment doubt that Convict 99 was done for. He remained no longer in the hospital, but hurried out to his gallery, took the roll of the prisoners under his charge, and was not sorry when the bell rang for the change of warders.

That night he sent off his letter to Mr. John Hardy

—the name by which Ralph Vickers was known to him —announcing what had happened, and demanding his blood-money. He had not waited to learn if Gray was really dead; indeed, so far as his own share in the transaction was concerned, he did not care. It was sufficient for him to know that he had obeyed Vickers's diabolical orders, and had seized the first chance of shooting Laurence Gray. He was heartily glad of being able thus to bring to a climax the risky business that he had been engaged in. He had lived in constant fear of being discovered taking bribes, and he now saw his opportunity of ending his danger by claiming the final lump sum that had been promised him as his reward for Gray's death. Already his special harshness to Gray had been noticed by the other warders, and Jerry O'Reilly in particular had dropped some very pregnant hints on the matter.

"Bedad!" the Irish warder had said one evening in the public house where they were wont to meet, "it's mortal strange, me boy, that yez can affoord to trate us like this, and you wid a wife and childer to keep. It's little a Government officer like you an' me can earn on the top of his wages; and what's twinty-one shillings a week, at all, at all? But so flush of the rhino as ye are, Misther Gannaway, I'd just like to be afther askin' how yez manage it?"

"I've nothing but my wages, Jerry; I swear it," said Gannaway.

"What? And wasn't it five shillings that yez spent here on the drink only last Saturday night? Arrah! be careful, boy, be careful now."

"Well, if you must know," returned Gannaway, "I had a few quid left me by my old aunt that died a few months ago."

"Well, well, then, me boy, if that's the way of it, all right. But, d'ye see, it's mighty suspicious-lookin' when a man has such a full pocket; and it was just meself that was remimbering about the lag that was put into chokey last week for having the tobacco in his cell. Of course we all know fine that the weed couldn't get inside the walls of its own accord. Many's the pretty

bribe I might have pocketed meself for smuggling in a taste of it to a lag. But it wouldn't do, me boy; no, faith! I'd sooner send in me resignation to her Majesty at wans."

"You make a mistake if you think I've been taking in tobacco to any lag," said Gannaway. "I wouldn't run the risk."

"No, yours is a safer game, eh? What about No. 99, now? Ah, it's divilish hard yez are on the poor boy. Shure, it's a decent well-behaved gintleman that he is, if he's only left alone. What's the good of puttin' the screw on him so mighty hard? Why don't yez pocket the bribe and lave him alone?"

Gannaway made a sullen retort. He knew very well that his harsh conduct towards Gray was becoming the talk of the whole prison, and he was in terror lest the cause of his severity should reach the ears of the Principal. Accordingly, the climax that had now arrived gave him supreme satisfaction. He determined that when he received the expected reward from London he would quietly make the money secure, and as soon as possible apply for removal to another station.

Until his letter of application to Vickers was actually posted he believed that Gray was beyond the doctor's skill; and it was only on the next morning, when he was called upon to attend the perfunctory inquest upon the body of the suicide, that he heard that Convict 99 was alive and progressing well.

This discovery made no difference to him, however. Vickers would never know any better.

"But if there's any particular reason why he wants him out of the way," Gannaway said to himself, "why, he'll be just as comfortable believing he's underground as if he really was there."

Laurence Gray was badly wounded, and his loss of blood weakened him terribly. But the shot had been extracted, and the doctor, who was a humane man, had given Laurence an early hint that he was out of danger. The comfort and the better food of the infirmary ward were welcome to him, as they always must be to a wretched and half-starved convict.

Among the Grimley prisoners every conceivable device was resorted to in order to gain admission to the hospital, and the pains taken by convicts to sham an illness were unending. Many, while at work, would deliberately maim themselves, or they would eat soap, and, foaming at the mouth, make pretence of having fits. They would even chew glass so that they might spit blood and persuade the doctor that they had pulmonary hæmorrhage. Fainting fits were frequent; but in order to test the reality of the illness, both real and sham invalids were treated alike. A great bucketful of cold water was thrown over them, and the process, though hard upon the genuinely sick prisoner, was a speedy means of exposing a malingerer. Every one who complains of illness in prison is regarded with suspicion. Many a man among his fellow-convicts would have willingly changed places with Laurence Gray for the sake of the daily glass of port, the beef-tea, and other luxuries with which he was indulged.

But Laurence had not been long upon his sick-bed before he learned that the bitter penalties that he had foreseen were all too surely threatening him. The prison governor was furious. The fine of £500 exacted by Government on the successful escape of a prisoner had been so nearly forfeited that Captain Podmore now looked upon Convict 99 as his personal enemy, and he determined to punish him to the fullest extent in his power.

No more now—not for years—could Laurence hope to hold communication with the outside world that for him meant only Geraldine Lucas, his beloved, his friend, his all.

CHAPTER XXI

FATHER AND CHILD

"Ah, yes. Ralph Vickers is a fine fellow—a thorough business man, and at the same time a thorough gentleman, upright and honourable. He's come to be my right hand in the office I think of making him my junior partner."

Mr. Lucas made these remarks at the close of a little speech on business matters as he sat at breakfast with his daughter one morning in late autumn.

Geraldine did not answer. But her father saw that she did not look pleased, and he sighed as he leaned back in his chair.

"I wish you liked him better, my dear," he said. "I wish that every day."

"Why, father?" asked Geraldine, with a sudden fear at her heart.

"Well, in the first place, because he deserves it. And, secondly, because I should be very well pleased if you could reward him for his long devotion to you."

"Father!"

Geraldine had started violently and grown pale. Mr. Lucas bent forward with an earnest look in his kindly blue eyes. But before he spoke again his gaze dwelt anxiously on her delicate face, dead-white as a narcissus petal above the dark heliotrope colour of her dress.

"You are getting pale and thin, Geraldine," he said tenderly. "You fret too much. This will never do. If it goes on I shall have you ill."

"It is nothing," she returned, smiling. But her father shook his head.

"It is very hard for me to see you sacrificing your health and happiness and beauty to the memory of a bad man, my dear."

Instantly her too colourless cheeks were flooded with vivid crimson.

"Oh, father, can you speak so?" she exclaimed, in bitter reproach. "Laurence is not a bad man. Have you--*you!*—turned utterly against him now?"

Mr. Lucas's cheery face clouded at sight of her pain.

"It is right that we should be merciful, my child," he said gently. "I, as you know, have never been quick to condemn any man. But we must not be blind. I loved Laurence Gray almost as my own son, and it has been hard for me to withdraw my trust from him. I fought against the facts as long as I could. But now I am convinced that he is an embezzler, and in all probability a murderer. His bad conduct in prison,

too, makes his guilt certain. Such a man, Geraldine, has no right to a place in your pure heart; and if he had loved you, would he have acted so as to forfeit the privilege of writing to you, let alone seeing you? No, no, my child. He's bad; irretrievably bad!"

The flush had faded again from Geraldine's face, leaving her deadly white as before.

"More than that," continued her father warmly, "you don't think it, and can't help it, but it is a disgrace for you to have been engaged to a man who is now in penal servitude, branded for life. People talk of it a great deal—that you, my good, beautiful girl, who hardly knew what crime meant should be betrothed to a convict! It is a great grief to me, Geraldine—a very great grief."

And the old merchant's eyes filled with tears.

"It will all come right in time, father," said Geraldine, rising and putting her arms lovingly around his neck. "But you must not ask me to give up my faith in Laurence. I cannot. I believe in him still, as strongly as ever. That report of his prison offences made me waver a little—for a time—but now I am convinced that there is some terrible mistake—if not something worse—at the bottom of it all. Every day since then I have been thinking over it, trying to find a clue to the mystery. What about these investigations you told Laurence's solicitor to make? Have they resulted in nothing?"

"They are abandoned," answered Mr. Lucas sadly. "I saw that it would be of no use to continue them."

She drew away from him quickly. A rush of sudden tears blinded her beautiful eyes.

"I don't ask you to lose faith in Gray, Geraldine," said her father, turning towards her, "but I think it right that you should give up all personal connection with him. Why should you hesitate? His own acts have broken the engagement between you. Besides, what is the good of keeping it up? He will not come out of prison until his time is finished. He will be dead to the world for at least twenty years. Indeed, young Vickers said he thought it very likely he would never come out at all, considering the terrible hardships

of the life, especially if he continues to behave badly, and so bring upon himself these extraordinary punishments ? "

" Ralph Vickers said that ? " interrupted Geraldine, stopping suddenly in her walk to and fro.

" Yes," replied Mr Lucas, not noticing the passionate meaning that underlay the quietness of her tone—not knowing, either, how every word of his was stabbing her young heart. " He said so some time ago, and I must say I agree with him. It grieves me very deeply to reflect that Gray's behaviour in prison has been such as to draw upon him punishment that is only given to the worst prisoners."

Geraldine did not speak. She was pacing the room again, slowly, full of inward tumult.

" I am getting old," continued her father, with a little sigh," and I should like to see you settled in case anything should happen to me. I want to see you safe in the care of a husband who loves you and will devote his life to you —one in whom, after long trial, I can repose perfect confidence. Ralph Vickers is such a man, Geraldine —open-hearted, noble to the core, and deeply in love with you."

" Did he tell *you* he was in love with me ? " asked Geraldine quickly.

" I have seen it for a long time," answered her father, with a sagacious smile. " But yesterday I taxed him with it, and he confessed it. I promised to speak to you on the subject, and his face showed his gratitude. I should certainly be glad, my child, if you could set aside your prejudices against him and see him as he is. I am growing attached to him, and could receive him very heartily as my son. I should like to be assured that my wealth and business would pass into the hands of one who would well look after them."

Mr. Lucas looked at his daughter appealingly. To his surprise her whole face was aglow with burning scorn.

" Father," she cried vehemently, " I would not marry Ralph Vickers if there were not another man in all the world ! You praise him, you think he is good ; but he is only deceiving you as he deceives others. He is cunning and heartless—a false friend, a hypocrite, and

a scoundrel! I warn you against him. Scarcely a word of truth ever comes from his lips."

Mr. Lucas looked shocked and grieved.

"Geraldine, those are hard things to say of a man, who, I believe, would lay his life down for you—hard things to say of any man without real cause and proof."

"Ralph Vickers is the sort of man to take care that there never shall be any open cause or proof," she returned earnestly. "He does his ill work in secret. If I were in your place, he should not remain in the office another day. I am convinced that he is dangerous, that every kindness you do him now will turn back upon you and stab you at some future time."

"At any rate, he can't treat me worse than the other one did," said her father bitterly. "And I must say, Geraldine, it seems very strange to me that you, who refused to believe strong evidence against Gray, should speak so uncharitably of Vickers without any cause whatever. It is all prejudice, nothing more. But it makes me very unhappy."

And with that Mr. Lucas left the room.

CHAPTER XXII

BLOOD MONEY

FROM the very moment in which he had received Warder Gannaway's significant message, "Shot in trying to escape," Ralph Vickers had been a changed man. A weight had been lifted from his mind. Anxiety and terror, that for months had stalked with him unseen, fled, and in their place came smiling self-confidence. His youth was renewed; the premature lines of care disappeared from his face. Now, as he looked at himself in the glass, he felt more worthy to be Geraldine Lucas's lover.

It did not occur to him that the insertion of the word "dead" in Gannaway's hurriedly-written sentence would have made the announcement more satisfactory—that, in short, a man might be shot without being killed. He never doubted that Laurence Gray

was really dead. His belief was supported, too, by Gannaway's demand for the reward money, a demand that had since been repeated more plainly in a second message. If doubts had troubled him, he had only to go round to the office of the Director of Convict Prisons in Parliament Street and there verify the warder's information; but he would have shrunk from doing this lest it should somehow direct suspicion against him. Probably Gannaway had counted upon his caution in this respect, otherwise he could scarcely have hoped that his deceiving report would bring him the money he so impatiently awaited.

Meanwhile, the necessity of immediately providing that reward money was the only difficulty that remained to harass Vickers. The sum he had promised Gannaway was a large one, and he must pay it. But where was it to come from?

He had not got it himself. Neither could he now get it from Geraldine, although he knew that she had not been able to confirm her suspicions of his dishonesty, and that she suffered acutely from the doubt as to whether she was injuring Laurence Gray by thus withholding the money that might have lightened his hardships. The failure of her attempt to get an interview with her lover had left her as perplexed as before with regard to Vickers's conduct. She did not know whether to consider Laurence's prison offences and punishment as proof that nothing had ever been done to relieve his condition, or as the bitter result of her own sudden withdrawal of help. She inclined, however, to a deeper distrust of Vickers, especially as, at the time of her visit to Grimley, the warder's money had only been due two days. She had taken it with her to the prison, intending to pay it herself, despite the risk. But her failure to see Laurence, and by any means to discover the warder's name, had made that course impossible. She was utterly powerless, and it was the anxiety of this forced inaction that was preying on her health and spirits.

Vickers knew well enough that no plea he could invent would now be plausible enough to induce her to give him the money he required. Otherwise it

would have inspired him with a kind of fiendish pleasuer that she should unwittingly pay the price of her lover's blood. The thought of this made his tongue itch to tell her that Gray was dead. But he must not—he dared not. No one must suppose that he had any private communication with Grimley Prison, any private source of information concerning Laurence Gray. Geraldine herself must not think that he had received any news from the prison since ceasing to act on her behalf. No, no. He must wait. He knew that the prison authorities would not notify the death. A convict dies like a dog, and is buried like one.

He must wait patiently, satisfied in the consciousness of his own safety. His heavy debt of guilt had been paid by Laurence Gray. Now that Gray was silenced for ever, none other would seek to drag that past crime of the killing of Charles Kesteven out of the obscurity into which it had sunk.

It was probable that Geraldine would only learn of her lover's death when letter-writing time came round. There would be no letter from him, and in her suspense she would implore her father to write to the authorities in Parliament Street. Then the truth would be known.

The blow would half kill her, of course, but Vickers trusted in the recuperative powers of youth, and the healing effect of time. After an interval she would consent to marry him in obedience to her father's wishes. So would his triumph be secured.

He flattered himself that he had by this time thoroughly worked his way into Mr. Lucas's confidence. He was now well-nigh indispensable to the old merchant, and his personal fascination had helped to win for him what he had schemed for—an influence over Geraldine's father second only to that of Geraldine herself.

Now in his perplexity about Gannaway's reward he thought of Mr. Lucas. He must borrow the money from him. It would seem only like an advance upon his salary. He had thought first of a possible embezzlement, but that would not do now. With wealth, love

and honour within his reach, he would be a fool to commit an act of petty dishonesty. It would be much better to go openly to his employer and ask him for the money. He would not be required to state what he was going to do with it. Even if he were asked, his invention would not be at fault for a lie.

He waited in his room in the office for Mr. Lucas to come in. It was later than the usual time of his arrival. What could be detaining him? Vickers wondered a little, impatiently. He had a letter to write—to Gannaway. He was obliged to write it at the office because of having no typewriter at home. Handwriting, even in a disguised style, would have been too risky, although his communications were always short and his statements adroitly veiled. Sometimes they were unsigned, but usually they were signed "John Hardy"—that being the only name by which he was known to Warder Gannaway.

He reflected, now, while waiting for Mr. Lucas, that the moment was opportune for writing this letter—the one that was to accompany the reward money, and the last that he intended to send.

The typewriter was on his table, and he began to work at it. There was no danger of interruption except from the arrival of Mr. Lucas, and he was of all men the least to be feared. Perfectly candid himself, he suspected no one of secrecy. Twenty letters might have lain about, open, and he would not think of prying into their contents.

As it happened, after having waited so long before beginning, Vickers had hardly composed half-a-dozen lines of his letter when Mr. Lucas made his appearance. He greeted his favourite as warmly as ever, but Vickers noticed at once that he was unlike his usual self. He looked older, and his florid, kindly face had a cloud upon it.

"Something has disturbed you?" Vickers asked quickly, moving his chair meanwhile so as partly to screen the typewriter, in which was still the half-finished letter.

"Yes," nodded Mr. Lucas, sinking into a chair, "I've had a talk with Geraldine this morning."

And then he told what had been said, omitting only the strongest parts of her passionate condemnation of the young manager. Vickers listened with a grave face and eyes slightly drooped.

"So there's no hope for me?" he said, when the account of the interview was ended.

"Not just now, it appears," reluctantly answered Mr. Lucas. "She's bitterly unjust to you, Vickers. I can't understand it. But you must forgive her. She's blinded by her grief about Gray. I believe she'd hate any man who wanted to supersede him. We can only look to time to alter her mind. But meanwhile she's growing very frail and white." He shook his head sadly. "It grieves me to see it. I'm afraid she'll get ill unless something can be done."

"Something must be done," said Vickers almost fiercely. "She must be made to forget that man. Heavens!" he exclaimed hotly, "it's a shame, a sin, that she should fret about a worthless blackguard like that."

At the end of this outburst he sighed bitterly. At the same moment he cast a quick glance backward at the machine upon his table to assure himself that his letter was safe. Mr. Lucas sighed too.

"I know it, Vickers; I feel the same. It is painful to me to see her suffering for the sake of a man who was never worth a thought of her heart. But women are made so. We can't help it."

"Why not take her away for a change of scene?" Vickers suggested. "Somewhere abroad—to the south of France, for instance. For her own sake, perhaps, she might not consent to go, but if you urge it upon her for your sake, she would yield."

"For my sake?"

"Yes. You have not been well lately. You need change badly. Take it—at least for a short time I will look after everything here."

"A good idea," said Mr. Lucas, his countenance brightening. "A very good idea, indeed. I will talk to Geraldine about it."

"Then when she comes back perhaps she will hate me less," murmured Vickers with another sigh.

There was a tap at the door. The office-boy entered with a telegram, which he handed to his master. Mr. Lucas, after reading it, sprang up in haste.

"It is from Rivers. I must go at once," he said. "Good-morning, Vickers."

And the money subject that had yet to be broached!

Vickers rose in alarm, inwardly cursing that business telegram. He must make sure of Gannaway's money to-day. If he lost this opportunity he might not readily get another. In his eagerness he followed Mr. Lucas through the outer office.

Meanwhile, Stinchcombe, the office-boy, who had loitered behind, looked round the manager's room.

His sharp eyes caught sight of the half-composed letter in the typewriter. He bent over to look at it, observing that it was not the ordinary office paper. Vickers was an expert typewriter, and James Stinchcombe, who was learning, was interested in Vickers's work. He now went to pry into it with no other object but that of admiration. But, as he read the few lines that were visible, he gave a low whistle.

"Strike me lucky!" he exclaimed.

He slipped out just in time to escape observation from Vickers, who was returning with an open cheque on which Mr. Lucas's signature was still wet. Vickers proceeded to finish the letter, never reflecting that he had acted with less than his usual caution in leaving it thus for a moment exposed.

On the evening of the following day Warder Gannaway duly received his expected letter with its enclosure of bank notes.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ABYSS OF DESPAIR

It was well into the month of November before Laurence Gray was strong enough to be removed from his bed in the infirmary to undergo his trial on the charge of attempting to escape from prison. The surgeon demurred at the removal of his patient at a time when

to disturb him might cause a relapse, but his remonstrances passed unheeded. One of the directors of convict prisons was then making his periodical visit to Grimley, and Captain Podmore demanded that Convict 99 should be brought up for examination. The governor of a convict prison has great power, but that power, nevertheless, has its limits. He has authority to act as judge in all cases of offence against the bye-laws of the prison, but he may not order any man corporal punishment. In cases where flogging is necessary, the offender is remanded to await the next monthly visit of the director.

On being summoned, Laurence, wearing only his under-flannels, with a blanket thrown over him, was taken out of the warm infirmary by an assistant warder, and conducted to No. 1 ward, which is a prison within a prison. As he passed out of the doorway to cross the infirmary exercise-yard, a blast of cold, wintry wind and sleet met him, and sent a chill through his whole frame.

He was thrust into one of the separate cells to await his turn. This time, as he was an invalid, he was spared the discomfort and indignity of being stripped and searched, but the cold of that cell was terrible, and he felt how very much his illness had pulled him down. Happily he had not to wait very long. Trials in prison are conducted with surprising speed. A large number of convicts on remand were to be brought before the director, but only one of these preceded Laurence. It was one of the carpet-makers, a brutal ruffian, who had made a murderous attack upon one of the warders. Laurence passed him at the entrance to the governor's room, and noticed his pale and terror-stricken face. The man had just been sentenced to two dozen lashes of the "cat."

On entering the room Laurence found himself in the same caged compartment wherein he had been once before, when he was reported by Gannaway for having the scissors-blade in his cell. He stood against the rail, fronting the table at which the director sat side by side with Governor Podmore and the chief warder. The director was looking over the report upon which

the convict was now brought up, and having read this, he referred to a large volume, in which was entered a full and minute history of the prisoner, with particulars of his original crime, his conduct since his arrest, and all reports made against him. The director was thus enabled to see at a glance what sort of a man he had before him, and the offences alleged against Gray were grave and numerous.

In response to some low-spoken remarks of the governor, the director, a severe looking-military man, nodded, believing, no doubt, that the convict, Laurence Gray, was worse even than the brutal wretch who had just been deservedly ordered a flogging.

Warder Gannaway was out with his gang. The charge against Convict 99 was, however, supported by one of the principals who had been present on the occasion of the attempted escape. He briefly described how the prisoner had taken advantage of the fog, and made away from his gang towards the river.

"And you say he was shot?" asked the director.

"Yes, sir," said the principal. "Warder Gannaway promptly fired at him."

"Quite right, too," muttered the governor. "Pity the officer was not a bit more sure in his aim."

"Where did the shot strike?" asked the director. "It was only a flesh wound, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir," was the reply, and the director turned coolly to the report.

Laurence heard this reply with suppressed indignation. Only a flesh wound! Why the shot had gone within half an inch of killing him.

"And the man is continually losing his marks—he is insubordinate?"

"Very insubordinate. The officers of his ward are continually having trouble with him."

The governor turned to his superior and made some remarks in commendation of Warder Gannaway. Then addressing Laurence again, he asked:

"Number 99, what have you to say in excuse for the very serious offence that you are charged with?"

"I have nothing to say, sir," replied Laurence,

"except that my life here was unbearable. I believe that the day warder of my gang—Gannaway—has been bribed by someone outside to act towards me with unnecessary cruelty. Others, too, have suspected it."

"Impossible—utterly impossible!" angrily retorted the governor.

"I observe an entry here," said the director, turning to the book, "referring to a visit of a Mr. and Miss Lucas. Did either of these have any communication with the warder?"

"No," said Captain Podmore; "they saw no one but myself and the chaplain. They came in a carriage, and drove away again at once. The prisoner was in the punishment cells at the time, and, of course, could not be seen."

"Quite so. I can see he's one of the worst of the men, although I should not have thought so from his face," said the director. "Let him be flogged. Give him three dozen."

The governor then addressed Laurence, who had grown deadly pale.

"For the offence you have committed the punishment must be severe. On your dismissal from the infirmary you will be taken to the punishment cells for a month. You will have three dozen lashes and six months in chains."

The signal being given, the assistant warder led the prisoner away.

Stunned in brain as if from a heavy physical blow, Laurence walked dumbly back to the infirmary ward. It was strange that he did not collide with the walls and doors on the way, for he moved like a sleepwalker, seeing nothing, hearing nothing. Even the bitter cold could not rouse him to consciousness. Once or twice, from sheer bodily weakness, he swayed, and would have fallen but for the support of the warder at his side. He was put into bed. For hours he lay in the same torpor, speechless and motionless. But when night came his dazed spirit awoke. Agony filled his soul—agony mingled of bodily pain and of bitter, intolerable humiliation and indignation. He turned on his pillow with a sharp, fierce cry.

The night warder came to his bedside, but, finding that he wanted nothing, went away again, muttering a reproach. Laurence did not heed him, but lay with close-clenched fingers and fevered brain. He was terribly near to madness just then.

The lash—for him !

His whole body revolted—not from cowardice, for he was no coward. It was not the physical pain that he most dreaded. It was the stinging shame, the branding outrage to his manhood. He writhed as the thought of it burned into his brain. Was there no escape ?

A lurid idea came to him. There was *death !* He was burning and shivering at once from the dangerous chill that his journey across the cold exercise-yard had given him. He would refuse to eat. He would tear open again his half-healed wound. His fingers moved with the intention, when a sudden thought restrained him.

There was Geraldine. If he were to die he would be separated from her for ever. No, he would recover. Hope and love of life sprang up again within him, though still the words that had stunned him rang in his ear.

" The lash ! The lash ! The lash ! "

CHAPTER XXIV

THE TYPEWRITTEN LETTER

" Ah, James, you here ? I want to ask you something. Come into the library."

" Yaas, miss," said the office-boy, who had been sent that morning to Fenton Court with a message from Ralph Vickers to his master. The boy followed Geraldine into the large warm room. He stood near the door, twirling his hat nervously between his fingers.

" Have you discovered anything more about that letter in my handwriting that you mentioned some time ago ? "

" W'y, no, miss, I dunno as I 'ave. I never seen it agen, not that sime one. But— "

" But what ? " interrupted Geraldine, observing a change in his expression. " Have you seen another ? "

"Not in your 'andwritin', miss. But I were just a-wonderin' if a letter as Mr. Vickers were a-writin' of the other d'y was anythin' as would interess yer. 'Twere a typewritten letter, yer know. Mr. Vickers, 'e's a dab 'and at that 'ere writin' machine. 'Is words is just the sime as if they was printed."

"Tell me about it," said Geraldine encouragingly.

"Well, miss, the letter as I were a-speakin' of, it weren't on the hordinary horfice paper; and I puts my eye on it w'en he went artside wi' Mr. Lucas. 'E'd 'ave bin in a rare state if 'e'd a-knowed as I seen it, I reckon."

"Why, do you mean that the letter was not a business one—that Mr. Vickers had some reason for not wishing it to be seen?" Geraldine asked.

"That's just abart the size of it, miss. You see Mr. Vickers, 'e's a 'cute un, 'e, is, w'en 'e wants to do anythin' for hisself."

"Well, and you read the letter?"

"W'y, no, I didn't read it all, coz w'y, it weren't all finished don't yer know. Wot I did see were somethin' abart a 'undred pounds as Mr. Vickers—no; I'm a-tellin' yer wrong, 'tweren't Mr. Vickers as were a-sendin' of the money, but Mr. John 'Ardy, w'ich, if yer arst me—"

The boy hesitated. Geraldine moved impatiently.

"Who is Mr. John Hardy?" she asked.

"That's just the wery question as I was a'arstin' of myself, miss. 'E ain't got nothin' to do wi' the orfice; I knows that much, anyway, sez I; and bein' as the letter said as Mr. John 'Ardy sends 'erewith a 'undred pounds in Bank of England notes and will be obliged by your sendin' of a noospiper acknowledgment o' the sime, in the usual way, I were a bit puzzled, miss. But two or three days afterwards I got a idea 'oo this yere Mr. 'Ardy was. Mr. Vickers were a-lookin' at a noospiper wot 'e took out of 'is little black bag, and as 'e were a-foldin' of it in 'is 'and, I seen a address written on it. The name as it were sent to was the sime Mr. John 'Ardy, at Mr. Vickers's lodgings, where there ain't no such person a-livin'. And then, miss, I guessed as 'ow this yere chap was Mr. Vickers hisself."

"Ah!" murmured Geraldine

She dismissed him, and then walked to and fro, tortured with perplexity. The boy's information meant more to her than he guessed. That mention of sending a newspaper acknowledgment "in the usual way," was especially suspicious in her eyes. During the time of their joint scheme for relieving Laurence Gray's sufferings Vickers had told her that the Grimley warder acknowledged receipt of the bribes by means of newspapers. Was he continuing to do so unknown to her?

If so, it could not be for good. Ralph Vickers was not the man to spend his money secretly for another's benefit—and that other his rival. Then, too, why did he screen himself under a false name? If his purpose was to do good, there would be no need for this diguise, since the risk lay upon the warder's side.

Geraldine stopped, disturbed and anxious, and leaned her hot forehead against the cold marble edge of the mantelpiece. Her great distrust of Vickers made anything seem possible and yet there was not a single thing she could accuse him of. She could not even question him about this letter that James Stinchcombe had seen, since to do so would get the office-boy into trouble.

She was torn with doubt, and yet her hands were tied. She was like one groping blindly in the dark. She felt that in some way Laurence needed her help, and yet she could not tell how to give it. This powerlessness oppressed her, caused her continual heartache. One thought alone gave her comfort, and that was the belief that Laurence, in his prison, secure under Government charge, must be as much beyond the reach of Vickers's power to harm as of her own power to help. She could scarcely imagine it possible that a warder might be bribed to injure a prisoner as easily as to favour him.

Meanwhile, her desire to know the name of Laurence's warder had not diminished. But she could only learn it from Vickers. If, by any means, Vickers could have been got to reveal it, she would have lost no time in resuming, on her own account, the communication with Grimley Prison which she had bidden him break off.

CHAPTER XXV

A BOLD APPEAL

GERALDINE was sitting in the drawing-room alone that evening, leaning back in an easy-chair close by the bright log fire, when Pearse, the footman, entered, with the announcement that Mr. Vickers desired to see Mr. Lucas.

Geraldine started.

"Your master has gone to bed, Pearse. He is not very well." Then suddenly she added, as the man was turning away: "Wait; show Mr. Vickers in here, I will see him."

Pearse departed, and her face, as she waited, assumed a cold, haughty look, very different from the expression of mingled trouble and yearning that it had worn a few moments before. Her whole form seemed to straighten into dignity.

Vickers entered, and she rose to greet him. He stopped by the door, and stood gazing at her, at once fascinated and startled. The fascination was the effect of her beauty, which he had not for months been privileged to look upon. The shock was caused by the change in her—by her waxen paleness and the increased slightness that made her seem taller even than she was. Her dinner-dress of cashmere and lace clung round her figure, showing its slender curves.

She, on her side, contemplated him. He had altered for the better. He looked younger, his colour was richer, and his whole face was gayer, lighter, as though a shadow had passed from it. She little guessed of what unexpiated guilt that vanished shadow had been the outward token. She did not offer him her hand or ask him to be seated. She remained standing and spoke in a cold, calm tone.

"I am sorry to say my father is not at all well this evening. He has gone to bed."

"So Pearse told me," answered Vickers. "I am very grieved to hear it. But you—you wanted to see me?"

He came forward slowly as he spoke, flushed and

smiling in a way that showed his white and regular teeth under his black moustache. But her face did not soften at his smile.

"I merely wanted to ask you," she said meeting his eyes, "if you have held any communication with Grimley Prison since our joint connection with it ceased?"

For an instant the suddenness of the question made him hesitate. He thought of the lately-heard news of Gray's death. But he dared not tell it.

"No," he answered. "Certainly not."

"You are sure?" she persisted, looking at him keenly.

"Perfectly sure. It grieves me very much that you should doubt my word," he added, with a sigh.

Geraldine slowly walked back towards the fire. She stood with her elbow resting on the mantelpiece, and her hand partly supporting her head. Her eyes, looking larger because of her paleness, were fixed on Vickers's face.

"My asking this was the result of a chance thought," she said, still coldly. "My father casually mentioned that he had advanced you a hundred pounds and it occurred to me that possibly you might have required the money to send to the warder."

Her eyes searched his intently, and Vickers was conscious that he paled. But the change of colour might be attributed to a feeling that was really in part accountable for it—a feeling of shame that she should know he had borrowed money from her father.

"No," he said steadily. "I needed that hundred pounds to send to a poor relation in the country—a man who had failed in business and applied to me for help."

"Ah!"

The explanation did not wholly satisfy her. And yet her heart, eager for comfort, leapt at the thought that perhaps it was his habit to communicate with people by newspapers—that he might as naturally have requested a newspaper acknowledgment from one of his own friends as from the prison warder. Still this

tale of a poor relation did not explain the false name—John Hardy. She was on the point of mentioning this, but restrained herself for James Stinchcombe's sake. Her knowledge of this fact would instantly betray that someone had been spying.

"What is your relative's name?" she asked suddenly. But directly she had spoken she remembered that the question was one she had no right to ask.

"It is no one that you would know," replied Vickers evasively. "Only a cousin whom I have not seen for years."

"You are quite right not to tell me," she rejoined, with cold dignity. "I ask your pardon for inquiring. Your relations can never have the slightest possible interest for me."

Her proud aloofness stung Ralph Vickers sharply. The hot blood mounted to his face, dyeing it a deep red.

"How cruel you always are to me!" he exclaimed, passionately. "You care no more for me than if I were a dog."

A sudden light sprang into Geraldine's eyes. She turned upon him quickly.

"That reminds me that I have another question to ask you," she said. "A short time ago my father informed me that it would please him if I would consent to marry you, and told me that he had your authority for stating that you loved me and desired marriage with me. Can that be true? I do not doubt my father's word," she added hurriedly, "but I think he must have misunderstood—"

"No, no," Vickers interrupted; "it is so indeed. I love you. It is the hope of my life that I may marry you."

A deep flush of anger rose in Geraldine's face.

"You have been trying to undermine my fidelity to the man to whom I am betrothed," she said sternly, "trying, too, to make my father an instrument in breaking his daughter's heart. Will you tell me how you reconcile this conduct with your pretended devotion to Laurence Gray? If, as you have sworn to me, you are his friend, how can you seek to betray him—to make me false to him?"

Thus confronted with his dishonourable conduct, Vickers gave way to the passion that at sight of her had revived with renewed intensity. Then, too, he thought, what did it matter what he said since Gray was dead and buried? He would not tell her that her lover was no more; but he could act upon the knowledge.

"Because I love you," he cried hotly; "and my love overcame me. I loved you long before Gray did, but I hid it until it was too late, and afterwards I stifled it for his sake. I've been his friend as long as I could, but lately I've been asking myself what is the use of further self-sacrifice. It is impossible that Gray can ever marry you. He is imprisoned for life. It is as if he were dead and buried—dead and buried—"

Vickers stopped so that these last words might fix themselves on Geraldine's heart. Her look of indignation spurred him to resentment. His face glowed as he talked, and his black eyes had the brilliance of strong excitement.

"He cannot escape," he went on feverishly. "Escape from such a prison as Grimley is impossible, and even if he lives and thrives and is so well-behaved that he gains a remission of his full sentence, he cannot come out for twenty years. Do you ever think what he will be like then? Those years of coarse and scanty food will have wasted his strength and robbed him of all outward refinement. Hard work and a hard life will have distorted his features--spoiled all the handsomeness you admire so much. The illnesses that come of privation will have shrunk his body, and long association with the vilest reprobates will have ruined his soul. He will be broken down, prematurely old, changed beyond recognition. Will such a man be worth your fidelity—you, a beautiful poetic woman, whose youth should be crowned with love and happiness, not spent in weary waiting?"

"You forget that Laurence is an innocent man," she said, motioning him back from her. "He cannot remain a convict twenty years."

"So you still cling to that delusion as to his innocence?" said Vickers. And he laughed mockingly.

"Who is to prove him innocent? He cannot do it himself."

"No," returned Geraldine quietly; "I will do it. I have advanced a step towards it to-day."

A shade of anxiety crossed Vickers's face.

"Advanced a step? How?"

"I have set a solicitor to work in the matter."

Vickers's eyes flashed.

"Neither you nor any man, nor God himself, could prove Gray's innocence," he retorted, "for the sufficient reason that he is guilty. As surely as we stand here now, he is the murderer of Kesteven."

Yet, with all his boldness, a shudder ran through Vickers as he dared to utter those words. The cold thrill even shook him outwardly. But Geraldine did not notice this. She had moved a few steps nearer and now stood before him, erect and stately, with burning cheeks.

"Go, Mr. Vickers," she said imperiously, adding in an icy tone, "I wish you a good-night."

Passionate love and quivering hate rose together in Ralph Vickers's soul.

"I will go," he answered her, smiling defiantly in the belief that the lover for whose sake she spurned him lay nameless and lifeless under the cold earth of a prison graveyard. "But I will come again. A love strong as mine is cannot be driven back. Though you reject me fifty times, I will come again. I will pursue you till you yield."

He was gone while yet his last words lingered on the warm, sweet air. She heard the outer doors shut after him. Then she turned and sank down again into the low chair by the fire.

"I will go away, as father wishes," she said to herself, "to escape for a time from this treacherous man. And it will be only for a few weeks: Laurence cannot need me until we return."

CHAPTER XXVI

ON THE WAY TO IGNOMINY

UNDER the kind treatment of the prison doctor, and with the better nourishment that he received in the infirmary, Laurence Gray grew gradually stronger. But this return to strength, while it restored his hope, brought him also daily nearer to the ordeal that he dreaded. The horrible thought of the lash dwelt constantly in his brain, burning there like a point of fire. At times he asked himself whether it would not be better to arrest his recovery—to refuse his food, to summon back in some desperate way the devouring fever that had so lately left him. But again the thought of Geraldine deterred him. He told himself that it would be cowardly so to evade his punishment. The old Lancashire spirit rose in him, bidding him boldly confront his fate. The struggle before him was long and fierce, and if he would triumph in it he must maintain his strength.

Laurence had great difficulty in securing for his own use the luxuries that the doctor ordered for him. The infirmary orderlies, who were themselves convicts, took every possible opportunity of stealing his food, and the warders were here more designedly brutal and unkind than those of any other ward in the whole prison. They grudged to a sick convict every extra comfort that his illness required, and being unable to impose any tasks upon their charges they took it out of them by refusing to listen when they called for help that might relieve their sufferings. The invalid prisoner was thus at his warder's mercy. If unable to move without assistance, he might lie moaning for hours in his agony, but no help would come to him unless the doctor or his official assistants happened to be present.

The day warder who was on duty in Laurence Gray's division of the infirmary happened to be a chum of Warder Gannaway, and Gannaway no doubt instigated some of the undue severity that Convict 99 endured at this man's hands.

Laurence asked him one morning to close a

window behind his bed. The bitter east wind was blowing in upon his close-cropped head giving him severe neuralgic pains.

"I can't close the window," growled the warder; "it's against orders. The doctor says there's not enough ventilation in the ward."

"But the wind is too cold," objected Laurence. "Can't you see that the snow is coming in too?"

"It's nothing to do with me. If you're cold, shove your head under the pillow and smother yourself."

An hour or two afterwards the doctor came upon his rounds.

The convict in the bed next to Laurence happened to be the ex-physician of Mayfair who had already spoken with him on several occasions. He had been invalided on the previous day. He called the doctor to his bedside and pointed to the open window. The doctor went at once and shut it.

"Did you order that window to be opened, sir?" the old convict boldly asked.

"No, I did not," said the doctor.

"I am glad to hear it," rejoined the ex-physician. "I should be sorry to see an old pupil of mine acting with such brutality."

"A pupil of yours?" exclaimed the doctor. "What do you mean?"

"Ah," said the convict, "I see you don't recognise me. But as it is likely that I shall remain under your care until the day of my death, it is perhaps as well that I should tell you who I am. I was one of the examining physicians who gave you your diploma. Do you remember me now?"

The doctor drew back and pronounced the convict's name—the name of a once famous West End physician.

"Yes," said the convict, "unfortunately I am he. Since my residence in Grimley I have tried many times to get entered here. This terrible cold weather has at last done for me, and now that I have succeeded I mean to stop. So you need not practise any of the usual economical impositions on me, doctor. Give me the proper drugs and treatment, *if* you please."

"I am sincerely sorry to find you here," returned the doctor, still looking at him in surprise. "I will certainly give you every comfort that the rules allow."

"I am obliged to you, sir," said the prisoner. "And now, what about this man in the next bed, No. 99? I hear he is ordered a flogging. Can you prevent it? That shot wound in his side should surely be a good excuse."

The doctor reflected a moment, glancing through the iron bars at Gray.

"I will see about it," he replied, as he turned away.

As a result of his conversation, Gray and his next neighbour received special attentions from the medical staff, and were subjected to fewer discomforts from the warders. Laurence was soon in a condition to leave his bed, and to take daily exercise in the infirmary hall. The doctor delayed his dismissal as long as possible; but one morning the governor saw Convict 99 at exercise, and inwardly determined to bring his time of comfort to a speedy close. On the plea that the infirmary was becoming overcrowded he ordered several of the convalescent convicts to be removed to the cells. Laurence was of those selected He was taken out to No. 1 prison. Still in weak health, he was ordered to strip and stand naked in the cold, while his clothes were searched.

Next came the bath While he was bathing. he noticed the bare back of one of his companions, and a shudder of horror ran through him. It was the same convict whom he had passed a few weeks before at the entrance of the governor's room. The man's back was scored over with the raw, livid marks of the lash. He was a powerful, muscular man, with the brutish face of a hardened criminal. There was no doubt that he had richly merited every stroke from those terrible thongs; but the sight of the leaden-hued marks filled Laurence with indignant horror. How long would it be before he, too, would be called upon to face that hideous punishment?

On emerging from the bath he was taken to the punishment cells, there to await his flogging. He was led across the open exercise-ground, where several

convicts were sweeping and shovelling away the newly-fallen snow. These men, who had all been guilty of serious prison offences, wore parti-coloured uniforms of yellow and black, with fetters that clanked as they moved.

There was something diabolical in their bright-coloured aspect, and Laurence, who now saw them for the first time, started and shuddered.

He had not yet recovered his warmth, and the cold north-east wind that came in gusts from over the high walls chilled his slow-beating pulses, and made his weak limbs tremble. He followed the warder towards a row of iron doors. One of these was unlocked, and he was thrust into a small dim cell that was lighted only by a tiny grating. The cell was on the west side of the yard, and when the key was turned upon him he found that the wind whistled in through the wide space beneath the door, sending a cold draught into every corner of the narrow place. His fingers and toes were already numbed by the cold of stripping and bathing, and the icy chill of the bare slate floor seemed to creep up through the soles of his feet, and to penetrate into every vein of his body, congealing the sluggish blood. He stamped about, but the effort hurt him; and when he tried to swing his arms his hands knocked against the iron walls of his cell. He looked around in the dim light for some bedclothing to wrap about him. He found a hard plank bed, but there was neither blanket, nor sheet upon it. In that hour of suffering and need, the disappointment, slight though it was, was like a knife-stab in his heart.

He leaned against the wall, feeling faint, as though the numbness were reaching to his brain. He felt that a few days of this suffering must surely kill him. Coming so suddenly upon his removal from the infirmary, the Arctic cold that now struck him threatened to overpower him, as travellers are overpowered in the snow.

He had been in his cell about half-an-hour when he was roused from his torpor by the sudden opening of the door trap. A small brown loaf and a can of cold

water were thrust in by an unseen warder. Laurence took the food and began slowly to eat it. The trap snapped to again in a moment, and he was alone once more in his wretchedness.

Suddenly a clanking sound attracted his attention. It came from the cell on his right hand, telling him that he had a neighbour, and that that neighbour was in fetters. The horrid jangling noise, loud and distinct through the corrugated iron walls, rang in his ears with a desolateness that was near akin to despair. It seemed to tell him that all was lost, that his torment and degradation would never end, that for him the wide outer world, with its loves and its joys, had passed away for ever and ever.

And yet, should God permit it to be otherwise—should it be granted him once more to go forth a free man among the free—what vengeance he would take upon his enemy, upon Ralph Vickers! The red of repressed passion flushed his worn features at the thought. Deep and bitter reflection had convinced him more and more that his injuries had come to him by Vickers's hands.

"What wrong have I done him?" he moaned, as he lay in his half-frozen weakness on the planks that at night were to serve him as a bed.

Presently it seemed to him that there was a knocking on the left-hand wall of his cell. The prisoner there wanted to begin a conversation. It was some time before Laurence, sunk into the stupor of cold, roused himself sufficiently to realise his neighbour's meaning. When at last he raised his tin water mug to knock in reply, he was prevented from doing so by the sudden opening of his door and the sound of a warder's voice.

"No. 99, come along here."

A thrill that was not of cold ran through Laurence from head to foot. Instinct whispered to him whither he was to be taken. But he went in silence, forcing his suffering limbs to do his will.

The distance to be traversed was short, but in the last corridor were sounds that made it long and agony-filled as a corridor of hell. Groans, imprecations, cries as of a wild beast, that rend the heart and make the soul

shrink in horror—all these, intermingled with the subtle "whish! whish!" of the flesh-tearing thongs, came from the room at the corridor's end, the great hall of No. 1 prison.

Laurence Gray set his teeth hard as he dragged himself along, and clenched his roughened and attenuated fingers. Something of the old dignity looked out from his pallid countenance as he went onward, thus to meet sharp anguish and bitterest humiliation.

The sound of the lash had ceased now, and the groans were getting faint—ominously faint. As Laurence and his warder entered the hall, the man who had been flogged was being released from the triangle to which in the old military fashion he had been bound. He was sinking into unconsciousness. His head hung forward, and his face—whose inhuman hideousness proclaimed him one of the worst of criminals—was convulsed and ghastly. His back was scarred with stripes, from which the blood trickled in dark slow streams.

CHAPTER XXVII

CONFRONTING IGNOMINY

REVOLTED at the sickening sight, Laurence uttered an exclamation. The surgeon, who was present, turned his keen eyes upon him with a satisfied look.

"Now then, off with your jacket and shirt!" cried Smith, the warder who had brought him from his cell.

With an effort Laurence obeyed. He was too ill to resist. Besides, resistance would be useless. Quietly, heroically, he braced himself for the ordeal. Outwardly he was cold, but inwardly he was devoured with sudden heat. There was a strange grandeur about him as he stood there, stripped to the waist, confronting ignominy.

He glanced once in the direction of the doctor, but he dared not speak. When he was ready, the warder led him to the triangle. There two of the other warders took him roughly by the hands, and in a moment they secured his wrists and bound him, his arms being stretched out, his face against the upright.

The man holding the lash—a burly ex-corporal, by name Rawlings—turned to the governor.

"How many, sir?" he asked.

"Three dozen is his sentence," replied the governor, glancing at his official list. Then aside to the doctor he added, "I'd have given the dog double that if I'd had my own way."

The doctor, who was kneeling over the still unconscious body of the recently-flogged convict, asked, without looking up:

"What's his offence?"

"Why, breaking prison. The scoundrel very nearly cost me a solid five hundred pounds."

The doctor rose suddenly, and looked at the pinioned prisoner.

"Go ahead, Rawlings. Don't keep us here all day," said the governor to the ex-corporal.

"Stop!" cried the doctor, facing his chief; "this man can't be flogged yet. He's not strong enough. The shock might be fatal to him."

"And a good job, too," cried the governor, almost savagely. "Do you forbid it? Pooh! what the devil—but the man deserves it if ever any prisoner did."

"Possibly," said the doctor drily. "But he's too weak yet to endure it."

"Bah!" rejoined the governor. "You're too soft with these blackguards. There must be a stop put to these attempts at escape. This is the third I've had to do with in a year. Go ahead, Rawlings."

Rawlings raised his "cat," waiting for the doctor to get clear. But the doctor turned upon him, with flushed face and lifted hand.

"I forbid it!" he said firmly.

Rawlings lowered his arm and looked at the governor. But Captain Podmore, though he scowled, was powerless to defy the medical edict. Nevertheless, he made another attempt.

"If he can't stand three dozen all at once, let him have it in two instalments."

The doctor shook his head.

"I cannot allow even that, sir. You forget he has only just come out of hospital."

"But he was not discharged before he was well."

"Before he was well enough to be flogged, though. He is really in a very low state of health."

The governor muttered a curse. "Take him back to the cell," he ordered sharply. "I'll have him brought up again in a day or two. Put him in fetters and the prison-breaker's dress."

All the blood in Laurence Gray's body seemed to rush to his brain. He walked back to his cell unsteadily, leaning heavily on the warder who conducted him. Now that the fearful strain was past, his overtaxed strength gave way. When the cell door shut upon him he sank down into unconsciousness. He recovered his senses to find himself drenched and chill. A bucket of cold water had been thrown over him by the warder who had returned with his fetters.

"Now, then, get up and put on these togs."

Painfully Laurence raised himself to his feet. Shaking with cold and weakness, he took off the wet garments that clung to his wasted figure, until at last he stood naked and barefooted on the slate floor, with the icy wind biting his skin, freezing his very lifeblood. Then after his flannels, his fetters were put on him—a heavy chain, each end of which was fastened with riveted rings round his ankles, while the middle part of it was held up to his waist by a broad strap. He caught his breath convulsively whenever the cold iron touched his shrinking skin. The contact was terrible to him, as if the heavy links had been instruments of death.

Then came the dress of disgrace, the punishment clothing of a prisoner who has attempted to escape. One side of this dress was drab, the other yellow; the front of one sleeve drab, the back yellow, and the reverse with the other sleeve. The knickerbockers were parti-coloured in the same way, and were made to fasten at the inside of the legs, so that they might be drawn on and off without removing the fetters.

Night and day, sleeping and waking, for six long months, would Laurence have to wear these chains.

Fortunate would he be if this life of a wild beast did not drag down his nature to its level before help should come!

When the warder had gone, he sank down again on the bare plank bed. He was not absolutely unconscious, and yet he did not notice the passing of the hours. He was roused once by the sound of a distant bell. It was the dinner-bell, but there was no dinner for him—nothing until evening, when his scanty supper of bread and water would come. Once a cry broke from him: "How long? How long?"

But for love, which clings hard to life, the grave would have been better than this unending anguish. The gloom of the little cell was deepening to darkness when clear above the confused clanking that sounded continually from the right-hand cell, whose occupant seemed restless, there came again the knocking from the left. The knocks were distinct upon the corrugated iron.

This time Laurence answered. In his abandonment and desolation this sign of a fellow-creature's interest was passionately welcome to him. Judging from the quick, eager rapping, his neighbour appeared to be a smart young fellow.

"Who are you?" Laurence asked, spelling out the question slowly in the numerical alphabet.

"Jim Lacy. Four weeks solitary for throwing my stool at a screw."

"Which screw?"

"Gannaway. Are you the lag that tried to do a 'bolt?'"

"Yes."

"Have you had your bashing?"

"No," replied Laurence. "The doctor prevented it."

There was an interval of silence. Then the rapping spelt out a statement that startled Laurence.

"You were a regular greenhorn to try to bolt in that way. I know a trick worth fifty of that. A safe one, too. I could get away easy if I wanted to."

"How?" questioned Laurence, in quick, nervous raps. But suddenly he drew away from the wall. He heard the warder approaching.

CHAPTER XXVIII

JIM LACY

When the warder had passed, Laurence listened anxiously for the reply to his question. After about five minutes his neighbour resumed his rapping upon the iron partition. Laurence spelled out the words slowly.

"I saw you when you tried to make a bolt for it. But I knew you could not escape. It's impossible that way. Even if you got clear of the prison you'd only be recaptured. Your prison togs and cropped head would betray you anywhere. I knew a lag who tried it on just as you did. He got clear and wandered about for five nights, like a hunted fox, sleeping under hayricks, feeding on raw spuds and wurzels. Never showed himself in daylight. Broke into a cottage once, and was stealing a suit of clothes when a man sprang upon him. He murdered the man, ran off with the clothes and some money, was caught and hanged. No; unless you have someone out by the boundary waiting to take you off into safe harbour, it's a fool's game to attempt it."

This narrative, brief though it was, occupied nearly two hours. At the end of this time a warder brought the evening meal of bread and water, and a mat and blankets were thrown into the cell for bedding. The allowance was scanty, and in spite of Laurence's efforts to make himself comfortable his limbs remained stiff and numb with cold.

Presently his neighbour rapped again. Guy's bed was next the wall and he raised himself on his elbow to listen.

"You can't sleep to-night," were the words that the knocking spelled. "Too cold. I want to talk to you. Listen to me."

The raps came short and sharp, as though the man on the other side were of an eager, nervous temperament. Laurence rapped back in answer:

"I am listening."

The prisoner in the right-hand cell appeared to be

sleepless also, for his chains rattled continually. This noise would in itself have been sufficient to prevent the minor sound of the wall-knocking from distinctly reaching the outside warders' ears.

"I've been watching you for months," said Laurence's left-hand neighbour; "I wanted to talk to you, and there's plenty of time to-night. What I've got to say is worth staying awake for. Look out that the screw doesn't catch us. Are you lying down?"

Laurence gave two sharp knocks, meaning "Yes."

The conversation was disjointed, and many words were half-spelled, but the meaning came out clear.

"All right," said the other man. "Now, what's your name?"

"Laurence Gray."

"Have you a good position outside—any money?"

"Yes."

"That's good. Now listen. I told you my name was Jim Lacy. By right it's Jacques de Lacy. My father and mother were French, but I was born in London, and have lived there all my life, except when I've been unfortunate. My father was a gentleman, but he got poor, came to England, went wrong, and died in chokey. He was a bad lot, and so am I. It's in my blood; I can't help it. This is my fifth lagging. I've broken my mother's heart, and brought her to poverty. But I can't go on the straight, even for her sake, though I would give my life for her. Are you listening?"

Laurence rapped "Yes."

"My time's up in another ten months from now. You're in for life—I know that. If I could manage to get you out in ten months' time instead of me, would you swear to do what I ask you in return?"

A shudder, half of cold, half of eagerness, ran through Laurence's frame.

"Tell me what that would be," he rapped back.

The reply came promptly:

"To find out my mother in London, and help her and protect her. I left her alone in the world. She has no relative but me, and I have nobody but her.

She's poor, and perhaps she's starved to death since I've been in prison. Worrying about her has been the worst punishment I've had to bear. Night and day I've been thinking, thinking what I could do to help her, and looking out for some lag, whose time was up, and who might go and find her out. But they're all rough and brutal. There's not one I could trust to keep his word. You seem different. You look good. From the first moment I set eyes on you, I said to myself, 'He'd do it.'"

Laurence was in amazement; he could not see the man's drift.

"But why not do it yourself, if you're going out in ten months?" he asked him.

"Because it would be of no use. I haven't a farthing in the world to give her. I'd go wrong again, and she'd only be made more miserable by seeing me fall once more. There's a fellow knows something about me that would get me another seven years certain, and he'd round on me directly I got out. So you see I might as well stop in here. I could bear life here well enough if I knew mother had a friend."

Laurence was startled at this strange mixture of irreclaimable criminality with passionate filial love.

"Would you swear to find her out and be a friend to her?" continued De Lacy.

Gray answered, without hesitation, "Yes."

"The chance may never come. But it is worth while being ready for it if it does. It's a bold plan, and a difficult one; yet it has been done before, and can be done again, if we're clever enough. It's this: if by good luck we're both removed to another prison before the first seven months of my ten are out, I'll change clothes, names, and numbers with you, and you shall be liberated in my place."

Laurence, as he spelled out these words, gripped his coarse blanket with convulsive force. He raised himself up on his bed. Oh, for the clearer language of the tongue face to face, eye to eye! This slow and halting process of communication was galling, maddening to his eager mind.

He waited an instant until the pacing step of the night warder receded down the passage outside. Then he rapped the anxious, amazed question:

"You would agree to work out my long life sentence?"

"Yes," was the answer, "for my mother's sake."

Gray interlocked his trembling fingers. Then a chill of doubt crept over him.

"It can never be done," he knocked back. "It is impossible."

"Wait," was the significant reply. And then a moment later, "Good-night."

Laurence was silent, although unsatisfied. It was long past the dead of night, and the jangling of his right-hand neighbour's chains had ceased, except at intervals, when the lugubrious sound told that he was moving in his restless sleep. Nothing now disturbed the silence but the regular tread of the warder outside, or the little click of the spy-hole cover as he opened it to flash his bull's-eye on a prisoner.

CHAPTER XXIX

GRINDING THE AIR

An hour or two later Laurence awoke from a bright dream of Geraldine. The dream had been so vivid that for a moment on awaking it lingered with him. He believed himself still near his beloved, happy in the light of her smile. Then as he moved came the rasping of his fetters and the icy touch of the air on his limbs. All the bitter wretchedness of his real situation rushed back upon his mind.

He remembered, too, his dialogue with his neighbour, uncertain at first whether he had not dreamed that also. When he had convinced himself of its reality it inspired him with new joy, but only for a few moments. Then he crushed the hope down. In his present suffering, relief and redemption seemed impossible to him. The living, pulsating world seemed to have receded into a gruesome indistinctness; his former life of freedom was like a vague vision of long ago, and he almost doubted

that there existed an outside world beyond the prison walls.

When morning came he was unrefreshed. He craved for some warm food, but there was nothing for him but the usual coarse brown loaf and can of icy cold water. He ate his bread piece by piece, almost crumb by crumb.

It was no longer permitted him to take exercise with other convicts. The punishment men had a yard set apart to themselves, and they were not allowed to approach each other on any pretext whatever. Their warders, who were armed with swords in addition to the usual truncheon, carefully watched them as they walked round and round the high-walled yard in single file, with a space of some twelve feet between the prisoners.

On returning from exercise Laurence saw his left-hand neighbour entering his cell. De Lacy's eyes flashed swift recognition into his. Laurence, as he passed him, studied this strange man who had declared himself willing, should opportunity offer, to make so great a sacrifice for his mother's sake. De Lacy was young, slim, handsome, with brown, eager eyes, brown hair, and regular features. Laurence found himself involuntarily thanking Heaven that there was no great contrast between them. This proved that hope, though faint, lived in him still.

The exercise had warmed him considerably, although his thin clothing was but a poor protection against the weather. The sleeves of his jacket were short, and, of course, he had no pockets. His unprotected hands and wrists were blue with cold. He wished for some active occupation, and had almost determined to ask for it when, on returning to his cell, he found one of the warders waiting for him beside a strange machine that resembled a small mangle. This contrivance stood in the middle of the floor.

"There you are," said the warder; "this is the graft you've got to tackle. You've got to turn that there crank handle ten thousand times a day. Set to, now, and let's have no grumbling—ten thousand times, mind you. You needn't do any more than that."

Laurence, left alone, took hold of the handle and began to turn it vigorously. The first few revolutions seemed easy, but the axle was low down, and he was obliged to stoop. He had done about thirty turns when he realised that the wheels required oiling, and that there was a spring in the cog-wheel that gave a sudden jolt at every turn, checking him and requiring a new effort to begin again. Very soon the work became terribly monotonous. He could only turn the handle from one side and in one position, consequently the same muscles were continually brought into action, and his back became painful. The thick, hard strap that supported his fetters rasped against his side, irritating the wound there until every movement made him wince.

He had counted only a thousand revolutions when he felt that he could go on no longer. Then he thought how easy it would be for him to persuade the warder that he had done his allotted ten thousand turns. He would have to tell a lie, but in his weak condition the temptation was great.

At midday the warder came to his cell. Laurence was working laboriously. To his surprise the warder instead of questioning him silently examined the crank. Alas! the machine was furnished with an automatic register, whereon every revolution was recorded.

"Why, you've not done fifteen hundred yet!" growled the warder. "Slip into it. Get through your graft, or it'll be all the worse for you."

"I have not the strength," said Laurence; "I am cold, hungry, and in pain."

"Cheer up, man," was the warder's retort; "you'll get a pint of good hot soup the day after to-morrow, and meanwhile the work'll keep you warm. But you must do your ten thousand turns, or I shall be bound to report you and then the chief'll put on another five hundred. Do you want any more cold water?"

"No, sir, but I shouldn't mind a drop of oil for this machine. It's rusty."

"I can't help that. You'll soon wear the rust off and get down to the bare iron if you peg away."

Laurence hardened himself to his task and fell to again. Click, click, went the crank. The work was all the more galling since it was utterly useless, producing nothing, but only grinding the air. The machine was simply an instrument of torture.

When he thought he had done another thousand he looked at the register and found he had only done six hundred. It was always so. His expectations were invariably greater than the actuality, until, at last, as he moved his weary limbs with ever-increasing pain, he could not bear to look any more at the pitiless dial.

On that first day he completed only half of his wearisome task. On the second day he did better. For four long weeks he was kept at it, working late into the night, but never once achieving his allotted ten thousand revolutions. The task was, in fact, utterly beyond his powers. A man in the full vigour of health, and well nourished, might do it, but not an emaciated prisoner, half-starved, benumbed, solitary, and almost despairing.

At the end of that month of separate confinement, Laurence Gray was wasted to a mere shadow. His hands were blistered by the crank handle, every joint in his body was stiff, and the hard belt that had at first been tight about his waist now hung loosely upon him. It was well for him that there was no such thing as a looking-glass to be had in the prison. Had he seen the reflection of his pallid, hollow cheeks and wild, staring eyes, he would have been appalled. But it needed not this to tell him how greatly his sufferings had altered him. His strong nerves were shattered, even his memory seemed to be weakened. He had strange palpitations of the heart. His legs were racked with rheumatic pains, and his head was perpetually tortured with the excruciating twinges of neuralgia. His release from the punishment cell came barely in time to save him from a return to the infirmary. He went back to his old quarters with the thankfulness of one who, on the brink of death, turns back to life.

CHAPTER XXX

THE CONFEDERATES

At dinner-time on the day of Gray's return to his old cell the chaplain came to see him. These visits of the chaplain were very precious to Laurence. They had been the only gleams of light in the long darkness of his imprisonment. In the infirmary, and the punishment ward especially, he had eagerly watched for the approach of that dignified figure, and the first sight of that noble face was like sunshine in the dreary ward shedding on all those convict sufferers beneficent rays of pardon and hope and love.

In the course of one of these visits, Convict 99 had told the good man all his unhappy story. This confidence had created a bond between them that was none the less close because it found no outward expression. It was hard to say whether the chaplain believed entirely in Gray's statement of his innocence, for nearly every convict in the prison declared himself guiltless of the crime for which he was sentenced, but certainly he was convinced that this man was of a very different stamp from the majority of his fellow-prisoners. He showed his regard in a certain added kindliness that encouraged Laurence to implore a favour of him:

"Oh, sir, to give me some peace—a little rest from this perpetual heartache—will you not write to Miss Lucas for me? Only a few lines to tell her how I grieved at not seeing her that time—and how it was that I was punished. Will you not, sir?"

"I am afraid I cannot," added the chaplain regretfully. "It is against the prison rules."

"She will think me hopelessly bad, lost to her and to the world for ever," said Laurence bitterly. "The thought of it is terrible!"

"Ask God for help," said the chaplain earnestly. "Pray for strength to endure."

"But for how long?" was the passionate rejoinder. "How long?"

"That, too, God must decide," returned the chaplain

tenderly. "If, indeed, you are guiltless, it may be that He will make it manifest soon. But even if it be long, we all must learn to say, 'Thy will be done,' and remember there is another world of recompense and glory."

"But if I could only know she does not despise me! Sir, will you not write a private letter, from yourself, as though Miss Lucas were your own friend? That would not be against the prison rules."

"It would be disobeying them in spirit," said the chaplain, "especially now." And he glanced down with sorrowful meaning at Laurence's fetters and drab and yellow dress. Then, as if his heart melted at the sight of the despairing disappointment on the young convict's face, he added, "But in a year's time, if you get no further punishment, I will do as you wish. Does that comfort you?"

Laurence gave a cry.

"In a year's time—another year! I pray Heaven that by that time I may be free."

With a few more words of comfort the chaplain went away, and the dinner hour (which was also the visiting hour) being ended, Laurence made himself ready for the signal to go back to his work of oakum picking.

Now, in his own old cell, he was again on Warder Gannaway's landing, but as he was not yet strong enough to go out with the quarry gang he only saw Gannaway in the mornings, and for a little while in the evenings before the night warders arrived. Still, short though their contact was, Laurence could not fail to notice that a change had taken place in Gannaway's conduct towards him. The burly warder was no longer unnecessarily brutal, but seemed rather to avoid the man whom he had formerly pursued with a ferocity that had awakened comment even in the callous bosoms of his fellow-tyrants. Laurence wondered at the change—wondered most of all what could have caused it. Gradually, his suspicions of an outside enemy died out of his mind. If Ralph Vickers had indeed been paying Gannaway to oppress him, Gannaway would only have ceased the oppression with

the ceasing of the payment. And why should there be a sudden discontinuance of the bribery ?

Could it be—and at this thought Gray's heart grew leaden with dread—could it be that Vickers had ceased to harass him because he had gained his end, the hand of Geraldine Lucas, and could now afford to despise a rival whom he had utterly superseded ?

Once conceived, this explanation of the matter grew day by day more possible to Laurence's alarmed mind. He forgot that it was wrong in him to doubt the woman who had sworn to love him always, although, to do him justice, he feared the power of circumstances over her more than he feared a change in her own heart. Then the uselessness of her journey to see him and the bad report she had heard of him must surely have undermined her faith, if not her love, and made the alienation of her life from his more possible than it would otherwise have been.

These thoughts were like demons goading the chained convict to delirium. They made his heart their constant dwelling and turned it into a hell. They tortured him at his monotonous work until he could have torn at his chains savagely, like a wild beast, and at night, even after the heavy fatigue of the day, they kept him from sleep, or allowed him only short spells that were alive with dreadful dreams. They hindered him from gaining strength. But for this he was not sorry, since thereby he hoped to be spared the still-threatened indignity of the lash.

Now, more than ever, he panted to be free. His dread and suspense concerning Vickers and Geraldine overcame his bodily weakness, and spurred him to a feverish energy. Night and day he pondered over De Lacy's scheme for his escape. Could he but get free he would fulfil the conditions faithfully and thoroughly; De Lacy's old mother should be cared for as his own. He burned with a desire to talk with De Lacy again, but weeks passed and he did not see him. He began to despair, to look upon that last bright hope as a will-o'-the-wisp that had shone before him only to delude him. A dank chill fell upon his soul. His fine

eyes grew to have a look in them of concentrated gloom that at times bordered on madness.

At last, one morning before breakfast, when he was returning from the tap on the landing, with his new-filled bucket of clean water he saw De Lacy issuing, also with bucket in hand, from a cell about six doors from his own. His heart gave a joyous leap. So they were near to each other still! He dared not speak, but the meeting cheered his sickening hope. He took it as a sign that Providence was watching over him

Speech with De Lacy would not be possible for three months yet, not until the isolating ban of his chains and parti-coloured dress should be lifted from him.

Meanwhile there was still no mention of the administering of his three dozen lashes. The doctor came often in the course of his daily rounds, examining him carefully and prescribing for him, but never spoke of his fitness or unfitness for the "cat." Laurence was perplexed at this silence. He distrusted it. Every day he expected to be led again to that horrible hall in the punishment prison, whose memory was sickening to his soul. He would have been happier could he but have guessed the state of the prison authorities' opinions concerning this matter

The governor had for many weeks past been constantly demanding that No. 99 should be brought forward for his flogging, and the doctor had as persistently refused to allow it. At last the governor accused the doctor of intentionally thwarting him, and a coolness ensued between them. The doctor, however, remained inexorable, and the governor, fume as he might, was not empowered to overrule the medical verdict. Hence Laurence's exemption.

So in hourly self-torment, and well-nigh unendurable suspense, the heavy weeks dragged on.

At length came the day when Laurence was released from his chains, and permitted to exchange the parti-coloured dress for the ordinary third-class convict's costume that he had worn before. With this change came comparative freedom, and the opportunity of occasionally talking with his fellow-prisoners.

It was now nearly six months since his first conversation with De Lacy in the punishment cell. He calculated with an eagerness akin to despair that De Lacy's sentence had now only a little over four months to run. Unless God should help him soon, this last, this supreme hope of liberty, would be dashed to the ground.

On the very day after his change of class he met De Lacy—or No 1,007, as he was known in the prison—in the exercise yard, and, by manœuvring was able to walk with him. Their thoughts were written on their faces, so De Lacy began without explanation, just as if their first talk had taken place only a few hours before.

"It'll have to be soon if it's going to be done at all, because next month I shall have permission to grow my hair and beard"

"It will not be," said Gray despairingly. "No such good thing can come to me I am doomed"

"Listen here!" whispered No. 1,007; "there's hope yet It's rumoured that there's a new gang expected from London In that case some of us will very likely be drafted off to another prison I will be going with the first lot most probably, and as they generally choose the worst lags to send away—to get rid of 'em there's a chance of your being chosen too." And No 1,007 grinned. "The other place, if we go there, will be a blessed sight harder than Grimley. But if our game succeeds, I shall be the one to suffer from that, not you"

The amazement that had filled Laurence on first hearing the strange proposal overwhelmed him again, drowning for an instant his own misery.

"You must be mad to do this thing," he said. "Think, it means slavery for life—at the very least for nineteen years!"

"It is for my mother," returned No. 1,007 simply. "I think what they say is true, that the strongest feeling a Frenchman has is his love for his mother. Anyhow, I know it's strong in me, though in everything else I've been a very devil. I'm in now for forgery. What are you in for?" he asked suddenly.

"Murder," Laurence answered. "But I did not commit it. As God is my witness, I am innocent."

The eyes of the two prisoners met.

"I believe you," said De Lacy gravely. Then he added: "I must know all about your affairs, and you must know about mine, so that if our chance comes we can answer questions. We'll arrange that to-morrow."

The next day was Sunday, when all the gangs exercise together, and scores of men who never see each other during the week meet and exchange glances of recognition. Very few of the convicts have to do any work on Sundays—only the hospital orderlies, about a third of the cooks, and the farm gang, a privileged set of elderly prisoners, distinguished by their blue dress with red cuffs and collars, who have to feed the cows and horses. The rest fill up the day with chapel-going and exercise. On this day the workers in the tailors' shop and other sedentary gangs often contrive to hear the week's out-door gossip from the quarry and bog gangs, and *vice versá*.

In the course of the morning's exercise Laurence Gray furtively told No. 1,007 his whole life story, and heard that of the forger in return. De Lacy, having been born and lived all his life in England, spoke without a trace of foreign accent. This was fortunate for their plan.

"The prison officials don't know me as French at all," said he. "I am plain James Lacy on the registers. Remember that, for our chance might come at a minute's notice, and there'd be no time for planning. If we do get sent off together we're bound to succeed. Convicts all look pretty much alike to strangers, and we two are more alike than most; same height and build, and same coloured eyes and hair. That's quite enough to deceive a strange governor. But what they look at most are the body marks. Every mole or scratch or tattoo mark a lag has got is down in the report. You've got the mark of a shot wound. Where is it?"

Laurence touched his side.

"What kind of a wound is it?"

Laurence described it.

"All right," said No. 1,007, with a meaning nod. "If it came to the push I could manage that. And now, look at this!" He drew up his sleeve and showed his left forearm. "It's a red birth-mark, you see. You would need one like it."

Gray's eyes flashed with sudden fire.

"And if my liberty depended on it I would have one," he answered hoarsely.

No. 1,007 fixed his eyes upon him earnestly.

"Give me your hand upon it that if I get you out you will protect my mother."

"I swear it," replied Laurence solemnly.

And quickly, unperceived by the warders, the two convicts clasped hands.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE LAST BRIGHT HOPE

A FORTNIGHT later the new gang from London, of whose coming there had been rumour, clattered into the courtyard of Grimley Prison.

A short while after their arrival Warder Gannaway flung open the door of Laurence Gray's cell.

"You needn't begin your work this morning," he said grimly. "There's a holiday for you to-day, and pack up your letters and things."

As though struck with paralysis, Laurence remained for an instant in the same attitude in which Gannaway had found him. His face was blank with consternation. No work? Was it then the much-dreaded flogging that awaited him? But suddenly light sprang into his eyes—glowed on his hollow cheeks. The prayed-for chance was come. He was one of those chosen for removal to another prison.

He threw up his arms in a frenzy of joy. At last! At last!

He had scarcely hoped that this opportunity would be granted him, and its granting seemed almost a promise of freedom. In his excitement he had not noticed the mockery in Gannaway's order: "Pack

up your letters." The same order was given to every convict selected for removal; but it had cruelty in it when spoken to Laurence by the man who had stolen from him the only letter that he had ever, while in prison, been privileged to receive.

Nervously he looked about his familiar cell. There was not a single article in it that he could call his own, but even here there were things to which familiarity had reconciled him—his little table, his hammock, his stool, even his tin utensils. More than all else there was his prison Bible, whose precious words had comforted him and given him hope in many a sombre hour. He took up the volume in his hands and reverently kissed it. Then, as he laid it down, his eye caught sight of a little grassy blade that grew in a crevice near his window. It was the only bit of green that he had looked upon for seven long months, and he had learned to love it and regard it as a token that God had not forsaken him.

Presently his cell door was again thrown open, and he was ordered to follow a warder along the gallery and down into the receiving-ward. Here he saw about a dozen convicts who were being handcuffed. He rapidly glanced at their faces as he joined them. A sensation of bitter despair came over him like an ominous cloud; his heart sank within him. De Lacy was nowhere to be seen.

The handcuffs were quickly clasped upon his wrists, and the long connecting chain was laced through the loop at his left hand. Thus secured together, a gang of ten convicts, with Laurence at their head, stood ready to be led away. The armed warders took their places, and, as the gates were opened, the order to march was given.

As he passed through the ponderous gateway, and was ushered into the prison van, Gray looked anxiously behind him. He saw that another similar gang was being made up; but, so far as he could see, the man upon whom his only hope rested was not among them.

Ignorant of his ultimate destination, and conscious that his sudden removal from Grimley must make it for ever impossible for him to meet De Lacy again,

Laurence felt a sickness at his throat which told him all too surely how vain his hopes had been. As the van carried him away he moaned and writhed in the agony of his deep despair.

"Doomed! doomed!" he cried, and he clenched his chained hands so that his long-uncut finger-nails pierced the skin.

Alighting at last from the dark chamber of the prison van, the ten convicts were marched into the railway-station and locked in one of the rooms at the end of the platform. Two warders remained on guard while their companions went off to a neighbouring public-house.

After about half an hour's time the rumbling of the second van was heard, the room door was opened, and No. 2 gang entered.

As they filed in, Gray had an opportunity of seeing their faces. Scarcely had he raised his eyes an instant when they met those of Jacques de Lacy.

CHAPTER XXXII

TRAVELLING COMPANIONS

A SLIGHT lifting of the eyebrows was all the recognition De Lacy betrayed, but a look of satisfaction passed swiftly across his face.

He was the end man of the ten who composed the second gang and the last to enter the waiting-room. Laurence Gray, inwardly excited to feverishness, was perplexed as to how he should get near enough to commence a conversation. He soon saw that this was impossible without the swinging round of the whole ten convicts of one of the chained gangs. Had he been at the other end of the chain De Lacy might have talked with him uninterruptedly for a full half-hour. The warders, no less pleased than the prisoners to get a day's freedom from the discipline of the prison, had put aside their strict watchfulness, and talking was not strictly checked. Nevertheless, Numbers 99 and 1,007, having the length of the room between them,

were compelled to remain silent, although knowing that the success or failure of their whole scheme depended upon the exchange of a few final words.

Presently the two warders on guard were relieved, and two others entered in their place, bringing in large cans of warm tea with mugs to serve it in. Still, there was no change made in the relative positions of De Lacy and Gray.

Laurence had for his neighbour a stout, red-faced little man who went by the name of Johnnie. Johnnie was one of the most brazen blackguards in that company, and he kept up a ceaseless flow of coarse jest and ribald anecdote. Laurence had become inured to this enforced association with criminals, but, chained to this blasphemer, he felt his degradation as keenly as he had done at first. He looked impatiently in De Lacy's direction. De Lacy was raising his mug of tea to his lips. Meeting Laurence's eyes he hesitated and then carelessly said, as he lowered his shackled hands:

"Will you drink with me, 99?"

Laurence caught in a moment the meaning of his ruse, and was about to approach him when the door suddenly opened, and the warder in charge called out:

"Number 2 gang—left wheel—march!"

The men hurriedly gave up their empty mugs to the two warders. As De Lacy, following at the tail of the wheeling file, passed within a few feet of Gray, he whispered the word "Patience."

Gang No. 1 was ordered to follow. Gray and De Lacy were now for a few minutes within talking distance of each other.

"Quick! listen," said De Lacy rapidly in French. "We're bound for Jedwood Prison. I heard one of the screws say so. We may not have another chance of speaking. Never mind. It's all well, so far. Wait till we get into the receiving-ward. We shall be ordered to the bath-house first thing. That's our opportunity. We shall have to look about us precious smart. I've been in Jedwood before—seven years ago. It's an open bath, and I expect we shall all be in the water

together. Good. Watch carefully where I put my clothes. Splash about a bit in the water, change places with me, and then, when we get out, dress yourself in my things. Don't be nervous about it. The new warders can't know us, and none of our pals will blab. But mind, as soon as you're dressed in my togs you must forget that you are yourself. Your name will be James Lacy, Number 1,007, in for five years for forgery. If they ask any questions you can't answer, say you've lost your memory in chokey."

"I understand perfectly. Trust me," said Laurence. "Here comes the train. We shall be in different carriages I suppose? Give me your hand."

The two shook hands, unseen by the warders, unnoticed by any but the stout little convict named Johnnie.

This worthy coughed meaningly, and, much to Gray's astonishment, muttered a few words in French.

"Be careful, my friends," he said, in a mock clerical tone. "Don't be too assured that none of our warders can understand you. It's a dangerous game you're playing."

Laurence, startled, turned upon the little man nervously.

"I trust that you at least will not betray what you have just overheard," he said.

"You have heard of honour among thieves," returned Johnnie. "Believe in that honour, my friend. It is not for me to betray a brother in misfortune."

The train glided into the station. A special carriage reserved for convicts was brought along the line from one of the sidings and coupled to the brake van. The men were bundled into it, the two gangs with their respective warders being placed in separate compartments.

No sooner had the train started than the men took advantage of the temporary laxity of discipline. For a moment all eyes were turned to catch a last glimpse at the great prison that crowned the heights in the blue distance.

"Good-bye to Grimley," cried one man.

"Ay, good-bye, bad cess to the place," growled another.

"It's *au revoir* for some of us, I'm afraid," added Johnnie, turning to Laurence.

"Indeed? I hope I may never have the pleasure of meeting you there again," Laurence replied.

"Hope is a delusion—an *ignis fatuus*," said Johnnie.

"Wot's that ye say about *fat?*" asked a broken-nosed lag opposite. "'Old 'ard, Johnnie. Don't yer go for to make a chap's mouth water, old pal. 'Tain't much fat we got at Grimley. Give me Brixton prison for fat. Yer can see it a-lyin on the top o' yer cocoa like cream. As fer Grimley, yer can't git much fat there, 'cept on Toosdays, unless yer eats yer candles, as Charlie Wag 'ere did. What did yer do wi' the wicks, Charlie?"

"Stowed 'em in me 'ammock," said Charlie; "that's w'ere the screw found 'em. I'd 'ave ate them as well, only I couldn't git 'em over the back o' my throat."

"Now, lads, let's 'ave a toone," cried the broken-nosed one.

"Who's got a pianner or a concerteena in 'is boots?"

"Gentlemen," said Johnnie, with an assumption of dignity, "let us sing the National Anthem."

"We don't want no National Hanthems yere," objected a convict sullenly. "Let Johnnie give us one of 'is reg'lar downright good songs. Plenty o' time to sing Hanthems when we get outside."

"Don't yer be afraid of no stupid songs where Johnnie is," said Charlie Wag. "Come on, Johnnie, old pal; give us that 'ere song abart the girl wi' the cork leg. I knows the chorus."

Johnnie began to sing solemnly. At first some of his companions moved restlessly, thinking it was a hymn. But soon the double meaning of the words was understood. The solemn notes grew into a quick patter, accompanied by the rattling of handcuffs and the beating of thick boots. Then came the boisterous chorus, full of ribaldry, in which some of the old lags in the next compartment joined noisily.

"Don't tell *me* as Johnnie was ever a toff," said one

of the men when the song was ended; "that ain't no society song. W'y I 'eard the wery same sung in a pub darn the 'Ammersmith Road afore I was nabbed for my third lagging."

Johnnie smiled, showing his strong white teeth.

"You wasn't really and truly a toff, was you, Johnnie?" asked the broken-nosed one seriously.

"Yes, I was, but you see circumstances compelled me to speculate with other people's money. I had to resign my living, and since then I have been living resigned at the expense of the State."

"And a precious sight you've made of it, cully. Education ain't been o' much sarvice to *you*," added Charlie Wag.

"I'm afraid of it, candidly," returned the ex-missionary (for such he had been). "You see, in my case the odour of respectability has had to give place to the more powerful odour of oakum. I regard myself as a living example of the ill effects of our prison organisation. Before I made my first hole I was an honest man, walking in God's ways. I did no injury to society. I don't say, boys, that I was guiltless of the first offence, but I might have been saved when I was released after my first imprisonment. But I was thrown destitute upon a merciless world. I went to the bad—it was my only resource. I was not guiltless the second time—"

"No, I believe you wasn't," broke in Charlie Wag; "I reckon by that time you was as bad a lot as any of us coves here."

"That I did," retorted the ex-missionary. "You are in for manslaughter. Nosey there is doing his seven stretch for robbing a bank. Number 222 is in for arson, and 99 here for murder. Now, I did nothing so bad as any of these, but the law inconsiderately put me in the midst of evil companions—that is my grievance. My fall is irretrievable. Intimate association with you rogues has made me what you see me—a degraded, profane blackguard."

"Ay, you're all that now, Johnnie," said Charlie Wag, with a coarse laugh. "You was a puffet saint w'en fust I know'd you, wasn't you? But now—well

now I lay you could give any lag a start and beat 'im 'and over 'and. Yer eddication's complete. You only wants a bit more practice outside, and then I bet you'll be as fly a cove as ever nicked a ticker or cracked a crib. Yes, my boy, *you* don't want no more learning. You'll be all right; you won't stop short until the squeezer nips your scrag, and then it'll be all up wi' you. Now, then, give us another song."

CHAPTER XXXIII

IN THE BATH-HOUSE

THE railway journey occupied several hours, and it was late in the afternoon when, having alighted from the train and been conveyed some six miles by road in prison vans, the twenty convicts were delivered up by their old warders into the care of the authorities at Jodwood.

This prison stood in the middle of a wide plain, apart from all other habitations. There was no chance of any of the gang making a survey of the surrounding country, as they were not released from the semi-darkness of the vehicles until they were within the high prison walls.

At once upon alighting, Laurence Gray looked about him for De Lacy. Fortunately, the two vans arrived at about the same time. No. 2 gang entered the long whitewashed passage of the receiving-ward in advance of their ten fellow-convicts. Gray, who was at the head of No. 1 gang, thus followed immediately behind his friend, and they were again side by side, as they had been at Grimley Station.

They exchanged glances, but did not speak. Their chains and handcuffs were at once removed by the new warders. The twenty men were then marched off in single file through the passage and across a yard to the bathing-house. To the dismay of Laurence, he noticed at once upon entering that the bath was not, as De Lacy had foretold, an open one where all would bathe together, but that there was a row of some five-and-twenty separate baths. De Lacy also was somewhat taken aback

by this unwelcome discovery. Between the baths and the long form where the men were to undress there was a wide space, along which the warders walked to and fro.

"What about that birth mark?" whispered De Lacy hurriedly in French, as he unbuttoned his jacket.

"It's all right," returned Gray; "I did it by suction in the van just now."

"Good. Hurry up then and undress. Quick, quick!"

Gray stripped himself rapidly and laid his clothes behind him on the form. De Lacy glanced at the shot mark on Gray's side, and murmured a word of satisfaction. Laurence had at first dreaded that the unexpected structure of the baths would have prevented the carrying out of their scheme as previously arranged. But De Lacy, in his life of crime, had gained unusual quickness of decision to help his natural cunning, and now, with a sudden, swift movement, he drew Gray's bundle of clothes along the form and adroitly threw his own down in their place. The next moment a warder ordered the men to step forward, each to the bath directly opposite him.

"All's right," murmured De Lacy. "Keep your own place."

Laurence breathed heavily in his suspense as he stepped into the water.

The usual ten minutes only were allowed for undressing, bathing, drying, and dressing again. With inward agitation, but outward calm, Laurence put on the underclothing that De Lacy had left. It was exactly like his own, and for an instant, in that unnatural tremor of nerve and brain, he almost doubted whether the change of bundles that he had seen De Lacy operate had really taken place—whether it had not been a delusion conjured up by his own heated fancy. Eagerly he caught up the outer garments. Ah, thank Heaven, it was true! They were trimmed differently from those he had previously worn. He looked at the cloth badge on the jacket, and saw that instead of the familiar "R. 99" and the letter "L," it bore the register number "M. 1,007" and the figure "5," denoting the term of De Lacy's sentence

He had scarcely drawn on his jacket when the word was given:

"By the right—march!"

De Lacy had not yet put on his boots, and as the files passed out of the bathing-house he hurriedly took his place in the rear, as far removed from Gray as possible. He had now become Laurence Gray, his own old name would henceforth stand on the prison registers as the denomination of a man far better and nobler than he.

Laurence Gray now wore De Lacy's badge. The badges were the only marks by which the Jedwood warders could identify individuals of the newly-arrived gang. Gray's exchange with De Lacy could not be detected by any of the Jedwood officials, and if any of the Grimley convicts should notice it, it was certain that they would not betray the fact. It remained, however, for the governor and doctor of Jedwood Prison to make their examination of the new batch of prisoners, and herein there was great danger of discovery.

CHAPTER XXXIV

VICE VERSA

From the bath-house the twenty convicts were conducted back to the receiving-ward, where gruel and bread were served to them.

After they had eaten this food, their numbers were taken, and they were told to take off their boots, jackets, waistcoats, and breeches, and to place the clothes neatly in a row of bundles in the exact order in which they were then sitting.

When they were so far undressed, they were marched in line into a large room, where sat the deputy-governor, the prison doctor, and the chief warder.

Here the men were told to strip themselves entirely. Presently the whole twenty stood naked, and the deputy called each man in turn before him to be compared with the written description of him in the official registers.

Laurence Gray waited in indescribable suspense while

four or five of his companions were examined and identified. At length his own turn came. He answered to the name of James Lacy.

The deputy read out the record against him, referring to his crime—forgery—and his sentence—five years. Then the chief warder, standing at his side, examined him, noting the marks on his body as the deputy read out the record of them

"Brown eyes?" said the deputy.

"Right," answered the chief.

"Good teeth?"

"Yes."

"Small red birth-mark on left fore-arm?"

"Yes."

The chief warder saw the cicatrice on Laurence's side, and waited to answer concerning it. But the deputy, apparently already satisfied, turned over the page of his report. Then he addressed Laurence.

"I find that you have lost nearly all your remission marks," he said. "And you have no chance of making them up in the short time that is now left to you. You will therefore remain in your servitude until within twenty-eight days of the expiration of your five years' sentence. In three weeks' time you will receive permission to grow your hair."

"Thank you, sir," said Laurence, and in his turn he withdrew to the far end of the room. Another danger was past. He felt his forehead grow cooler and his heart beat less rapidly.

Johnnie, the ex-missionary, was the next man examined. Laurence noticed that the little rogue's naked back was carefully looked at by the warder for the marks of flogging.

One by one the rest of the men underwent the official inspection, and as Laurence was putting on some clean underclothing that was given to him he heard his own name pronounced.

"Laurence Gray!"

A thrill ran through him from head to foot. He needed all his self-control not to step forward at the call.

De Lacy answered to it and took his stand.

The deputy-governor regarded him with keen scrutiny. The report against Laurence Gray was a severe one. Primarily, the fact of his being sentenced to life-long imprisonment stamped him as one of the worst of criminals, and his punishments at Grimley, first for having a formidable weapon in his cell, and second, for his attempted escape, signified to the officials at Jedwood that in him they had to deal with a very bad character.

"I don't know how it is," muttered the deputy aside to the doctor, "but that Captain Podmore has a deuced easy way of getting rid of his worst men and turning them off upon others. Why he should have sent this particular man here I can't well understand. But come along, it's nearly tea-time and I'm getting peckish. Ninety-nine, this is a black record against you," he added, looking up at De Lacy. "You made an attempt at escape some six months ago, I see?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were you flogged?"

"No, sir; the doctor said I was not fit for it. I was shot at and wounded."

"What punishment did you receive?"

"A month's separate confinement, with work at the crank, and six months in chains, sir."

"Where were you wounded?"

"In the side, sir," answered De Lacy.

Laurence, from a distance, listening intently, marvelled at the coolness with which his confederate spoke.

The warder looked at De Lacy's side and saw there a mark which, superficially at least, was not unlike that of a shot wound which had been probed and doctored. The warder, as it chanced, was not sufficiently skilled to recognise that the wound was of much more recent date than six months before. His attention was directed, however, by the sight of a black smear on the convict's left arm.

"What's that?" he asked gruffly. "Why didn't you wash yourself properly just now?"

"It's some pitch that I rubbed against this morning when I was coming out of my cell," De Lacy answered boldly. "I couldn't wash it off."

In reality he had designedly smeared his arm with the pitch in order to cover the red birth-mark of which there was naturally no note set down in the description of Laurence Gray.

"Better ask your warder for some grease and clean yourself," said the chief.

The further examination of the new "R. 99" was concluded without any betrayal of his real identity.

Laurence Gray was the only one of the Grimley squad who was noted in the transfer reports as being in weak health. The doctor, however, did not personally examine De Lacy, but simply told him that if he required any medical help he was to apply for it in the usual way. For the present he would be put in the tailors' shop, where he would have work that would conduce towards his recovery.

On being dismissed, the twenty men were taken out to the passage, where their clothes had been left to be searched. They dressed themselves, and were conducted to their respective wards.

When the door of his cell had been shut upon him, Laurence Gray sank upon his knees, and, leaning his elbows on the wooden stool, buried his face in his hands in an excess of joy that was almost like pain.

"Geraldine! Geraldine!" he cried to his beloved in his heart, "I will come to you soon! Only three months more, and I shall see your face again!"

The hope was intoxicating—maddening. He trembled at his own delight. In the old days he would never have believed that mere freedom could seem so sweet a thing. He wanted nothing else in the world now—save only Geraldine.

He thought of what De Lacy had undertaken to endure in his stead, and earnestly vowed to himself that he would repay to the young convict's mother this great debt of gratitude that he owed to her son. Then suddenly the recollection that he was not yet safe rushed into his mind, chilling his blood. He might be discovered—even at the very last moment of his escape something might happen to betray him. But he would not linger on the terrible fear. He trusted in

his own strength, in his right of innocence, and in God's help.

He knelt praying until the signal for going to bed resounded in the massive prison walls.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE STRESS OF CIRCUMSTANCE

"GOOD-EVENING, Miss Lucas."

It was dusk, and the lamps had just been lighted in the library at Fenton Court. But Geraldine Lucas was scarcely conscious of the soft glow they shed upon her as she leaned back in an easy chair, against whose cushions her head rested wearily.

It was several months since she and her father had taken their trip to the South of France. The change had done her no good, but Mr. Lucas's health had seemed to benefit by it. He had maintained his renewed strength and cheerfulness until about a fortnight ago, when he had caught a chill which had settled on his lungs.

He was now lying seriously ill. Geraldine had just left him. Worn out by devoted watching, she had that morning been persuaded by the doctor to go to her own room and take some rest. She had slept for many hours, and on returning to her father's bedside had learnt that during her absence Ralph Vickers, now junior partner in the firm of Christopher Lucas & Co., had called and spent a long time in the sick-room, and had been appointed sole trustee of her property in the event of Mr. Lucas's death. More than that, her father had implored her to consent to become Vickers's wife. He would not, he said, seek to influence her decision if he lived; but for the sake of his peace of mind, he appealed to her to promise him that if he should die she would marry the man whom he had appointed her guardian and protector.

Torn between her love for her suffering father and her heart's revolt against the thing he asked of her, Geraldine had rushed away from the bedside and down-stairs to the empty library. She wanted to be alone to

think, to realise her position. She felt stifled, dazed, entrapped. Wherever she looked she saw trouble and danger awaiting her.

Her father was in a condition so critical that any moment might bring a fatal relapse. This alone was terrible enough without the constant persecutions of Ralph Vickers, and the inexplicable silence of Laurence Gray. And now Vickers, taking advantage of her father's weakness, had used his subtle influence to obtain the post of sole trustee of her property, thereby acquiring a power over her that he would surely afterwards exert to force her into compliance with his wishes.

In despair she asked herself what it was that so blinded her father to Vickers's real nature—how it was that a parent who loved his child so well could thus rashly place her whole future under a bad man's control. And not satisfied with trusting her fortune to Vickers's care, her father now besought her to give her hand and life to him also—besought her with urgent appeals to the love and duty she owed himself.

He had implored her with the authority of one who speaks from what may prove to be his death bed. But she could not yield. Not even for his sake could she foreswear her fidelity to her old lover, and consent to marry a man whom her inmost heart abhorred.

And why had Laurence not written? It was more than a year now since her fruitless visit to Grimley Prison, and in all that time she had heard nothing. What could it mean? Had he forgotten her? Or could it be that, as her father had frequently suggested, he had acted so ill in prison as to forfeit entirely the privilege of writing?"

No, no! that was impossible. The prison system must be terrible indeed if one so manly and so noble could be goaded into vulgar insubordination. Yet vague fears assailed her—fears both for him and for herself. Strangely enough, too, her misgivings were invariably associated with the thought of Vickers. His influence seemed to peer out mockingly from the heart of every trouble that came to her. She felt his will like a network encompassing her, paralysing her

efforts. But he should never conquer. Alone she would struggle against him—would baffle him—

"Good-evening, Miss Lucas."

She looked up with a start. There, before her in the lamplight, stood Ralph Vickers himself. He looked paler than usual, and there was an expression of mock gravity upon his face.

Geraldine replied coldly to his salutation. Her beautiful features seemed to harden into stone as she surveyed him.

"You entered very silently. I am not accustomed to be intruded upon so stealthily."

"I beg your pardon," rejoined Vickers. "My excuse must be that I want to talk with you."

Without permission he seated himself in a large chair facing the one in which she sat. Leaning back negligently, yet with one hand grasping each arm of the chair, he fixed his sombre eyes upon her.

"I have just left your father. There is no improvement in his condition."

A shudder passed through Geraldine, but she said nothing. She only coldly returned the basilisk look fastened on her.

"He told me that you were greatly disturbed at a suggestion he made concerning me."

"I do not wish to speak of that," said Geraldine, rising.

"Excuse me." The tone of his voice detained her as she was preparing to walk away. "Your father desires that we should speak of it. Geraldine, it is the dearest wish of his heart that you should give yourself to me."

"I will not hear this, Mr. Vickers."

She moved towards the door; but Vickers, rising suddenly, got before her and barred the way.

"You shall hear it. I will not be treated like this any longer. Your father implores you to marry me. Will you dare to refuse him, ill as he is?"

Geraldine had recoiled a few steps, and now stood before him, white with indignation. At his last words the whiteness changed to crimson in her cheeks.

Even Vickers shrank for an instant before the new fire and anger that darkened her ordinarily tender eyes.

"I shall dare to be true to the man to whom I have sworn fidelity," she answered, with quiet passion. "I love my father deeply. I would buy back his health with the sacrifice of my own—I would gladly die to save him, if I could—but I cannot do wrong at his bidding. Besides, you have blinded him. If he could read your character as clearly as I read it, he would cut out his tongue sooner than demand that I should wreck my life by joining it to yours."

A fleeting gleam in Vickers's eyes showed that her words had stung him. But he controlled himself well. Only her scornful defiance of him precipitated a revelation which he now felt himself secure in making.

"If it is your duty to Laurence Gray that prevents you from consenting to become my wife, you need trouble no more about the matter," he said lightly. "That obstacle is removed."

She looked at him fixedly.

"What do you mean?"

He stood rigidly immovable, but his eyes seemed to drive into her resisting soul the three short words that his lips uttered.

"Gray is dead."

He saw a convulsion pass over her face. Her eyes had taken a wild look of startled horror. But she said firmly:

"I do not believe it."

"It is the truth," returned Vickers hoarsely, stirred to rage by the thought that he could not in any way move her, nor shake her faith. "It is as true as that we both stand here."

She trembled again, but held herself outwardly calm.

"I cannot trust your bare word, Mr. Vickers."

"How you insult me!" he muttered between his closed teeth. And then, going nearer to her, he repeated fiercely, "I tell you it is true—true—true!" He was now so close to her that his hot breath touched her cheek. "I heard it from the warder. He was shot in trying to escape nearly a year ago."

The fierce conviction in his words swept all doubt before it. The man's real self was apparent, eager and cunning, under the mask of his society manner.

Geraldine swayed in her deepening terror. The brightly-lighted room began to reel about her. Yet still she fought against belief.

"It cannot be! It cannot be—"

But the recollection of this long year of silence rushed over her, drowning her hope. Her voice died in her throat with a choking sound. Vickers noted her whitening lips and the unsteadiness of the hand that was reaching out to the heavy library-table for support.

Shot—in trying to escape! The dear, warm heart stilled for ever; the loved face cold and bloodless; the noble spirit fled—

"It cannot be," she protested again, but silently, for although her lips moved, yet no sound came from them. "I do—not—believe."

She put out her arms as if to beat away the appalling thought. She had forgotten where she was. Her brain was whirling. She was not conscious of Ralph Vickers's clasp as he half led, half carried her back to her chair. Neither did she hear him when presently he murmured in a satisfied tone:

"We shall get our way with her after all—the old man and I. She will promise to marry me now."

CHAPTER XXXVI

WARDER HEWITT

FROM the day on which their bold exchange of names and sentences had been effected, Laurence Gray and Jacques de Lacy saw very little of each other in Jedwood Prison. De Lacy, impersonating Laurence Gray, was put to light work in the tailors' shop, while Gray was placed in one of the outdoor gangs that were labouring on the prison railway, then in course of construction. Their separation, however, was an advantage, since they thus evaded the danger of being too frequently seen talking together. It was only on Sundays, during

the exercise hour, that they could contrive to exchange a few words.

Laurence soon realised that the discipline at Jedwood was far more rigid than at Grimley, and that the warders were more strict; his work, too, was more laborious. But he had the great satisfaction of knowing that, should his identity remain undetected his imprisonment would not last much longer, and he worked with a lighter heart than he had done since the beginning of his penal servitude.

Anxiously he counted the weeks and days that were to elapse before his release. Nevertheless, he was in constant fear lest by some unhappy chance the deception he was practising should be discovered, and the barrier of life-long detention and close surveillance—a barrier stronger than before, inexorable, eternal—be raised between him and the desire of his heart. With every day he grew more anxious. His consciousness that he was acting a part made him suspicious of everyone about him—suspicious of his fellow-convicts, and, more than all, suspicious of the warders. His eyes, once so smiling and fearless, had gained a restless, feverish look, and shrank from the steady gaze of others.

It was only at night, when alone in his cell, that he gave rein to the keen, strong hopes, the rapturous joy, that possessed him. There in the darkness his excited imagination would show him the sweet face of Geraldine, vivid and clear, as when he had last seen it in the flesh on that occasion of their parting in the glass-room at Newgate. Then death had been before him; now it was love that beckoned. Life, that had been so nearly lost, now stretched before him, sunlit and rich with promise. After the agony through which he had passed, the simple happiness of every day would seem like the bliss of Paradise. Night after night he would picture to himself the delight that awaited him, until he grew afraid of his own joy. Then he would get out of his hard bed and kneel and pray.

There was one among the warders, a man named Hewitt, who gave him continual uneasiness. It was on the first day of his toil upon the railway line that

he encountered this man. The tone of Hewitt's voice, as he gruffly gave him some orders, fell upon Laurence's ears with an almost familiar ring, and certain idiomatic words that he used proved him to be a Lancashire man.

Laurence looked up at him in surprise, and studied his features carefully. Suddenly he dropped the heavy bar of iron that he was lifting. He made a step forward, then checked himself. A feeling of sickening fear came over him. He had recognised Hewitt as a man who, years before, had known him intimately in the Blackburn factory. He was in terror lest the recognition should be mutual. All his hopes, all his chances of restoration to liberty, now depended upon this one warder. Should this man once suspect what had been done, should he by chance recognise his old acquaintance, Laurence Gray, it would be a simple matter for him further to discover that another convict was bearing Gray's name. For the sake of a possible promotion, if not for duty's sake alone, he would certainly report the discovery to the governor, and the whole scheme would be immediately exposed. The dread of this possibility became as a nightmare to Laurence Gray. He took courage in the fact that his cropped head, shaven face, and prison costume afforded him a temporary protection. He had looked forward with passionate eagerness to the time when he should have permission to grow his hair and beard, thinking to date from that day his return to his former self. But in this restored dignity he now foresaw danger. His lengthening brown locks would inevitably add to the risk of his recognition by anyone who had known him during his days of freedom.

Hewitt had been formerly a timekeeper in the Blackburn factory where Gray had served his apprenticeship. He had associated with him intimately before Laurence had removed to London, but had then lost all knowledge of him until the time of the Gospel Oak murder, when the newspaper reports of the trial had brought Gray's name into notoriety. At that period Hewitt had already received his appointment as an assistant warder at Jedwood Prison, and it was natural that on reading

of the commutation of Gray's death-sentence to penal servitude for life he should consider it as not improbable that Laurence might at some time be drafted to Jedwood. Accordingly, whenever a new gang of convicts had arrived from other prisons, he had half expected to find his old friend among them.

On that first day of their meeting, before his recognition by Gray, Hewitt looked intently into Laurence's face. Those deep brown eyes certainly recalled the eyes of Laurence Gray, but the badge on Laurence's left breast had told him that the new man was only a five years' convict, and he turned carelessly away.

Warder Hewitt had a characteristic not uncommon among the officials of convict prisons. He had a mania for ordering the men under his charge to have their hair cropped. Every evening he would call men out to be operated upon. Laurence Gray did not escape the irritation of this petty tyranny. His hair was kept cropped as close as scissors could cut. He bore it silently, knowing that remonstrance would be useless. But at last came the day on which he had run out his time to within three months of his release. On the morning of that day he put out his broom under his cell door to signify that he wanted to see the governor.

At dinner-time an interview was granted him; he boldly made his application to grow his hair and beard. The permission was accorded him without question, and his name—or, rather, that of James Lacy—was entered upon a list, which was hung up in the ward.

On that same evening he saw Hewitt reading the names, and he felt that he was still safe. It was evident that the warder had not yet discovered his secret.

Day by day and week by week as his hair grew longer he became more and more agitated when in the presence of this warder. As a convict approaching his release he was placed on extra diet, to be fattened up so that his friends might not be too incensed against the authorities. Herein lay another immediate danger, for as he gradually recovered his full health, so also did his features regain their youthful fineness of outline. Warder Hewitt's eyes began to dwell on him more

frequently; the doubt in them changed to suspicion, the suspicion to menacing severity.

At length the time came when Laurence, instead of counting by months or weeks, could calculate the hours and almost the moments that yet separated him from liberty and Geraldine. Many things bore witness that that blessed time was approaching. The prison chaplain visited him more often, giving him good counsel concerning his future conduct in the outer world, and promising him a Bible and a Prayer-book—the usual gift to departing convicts. One day he was measured for the suit of liberty clothes that was to be supplied to him in place of the garments he had forfeited at Newgate. On another occasion he was called out to be photographed. This last was an ordeal from which he shrank with bitterest repugnance. He could not endure the thought that his likeness was doomed to have its place in the portrait gallery of criminals. The necessity for this reminded him, too, of the fact that his release from prison would not mean an entire release from humiliating police surveillance—that after all the injuries he had received, the sufferings he had endured, there yet remained one crowning insult to be borne, that of being a "ticket-of-leave" man.

One day, about three weeks before his discharge, Laurence Gray, working like a slave on the railway embankment, was conscious that he was being closely watched by Warder Hewitt. Whenever he raised his head the foxy eyes of the warder were upon him, taking account of his every movement. At last Hewitt approached him and spoke.

"Hast tha ever bin i' Blackburn, young man?" he asked abruptly, in broad Lancashire dialect.

"Blackburn?" echoed Laurence aghast.

"Ay, Blackburn. Happen yo never heerd o't' place, eh? I thowt as I'd seen yo theer."

Laurence, growing pale, bent down to continue his labour. It would have been better for him, perhaps, if he had answered in the negative. But whenever it was possible he avoided telling a lie.

"Look here, lad," persisted the warder, "there's

summut as I doan't understand about *yo*. I've had my suspicions ever sin' yo come here, and now as the thatch is a-growin' I'm nigh certain on't. James Lacy beant thee reel naame. But I'll ask t' governor. Happen *he'll* get to t' bottom o' thee tricks, my lad."

CHAPTER XXXVII

AT THE BRINK OF FREEDOM

LAURENCE'S pulses throbbed fast. But he remained silent. He now knew that the warder had partly recognised him. It only required that he should discover by reference to the prison register the fact that the name "Laurence Gray" was entered there, and then all would be over.

This was in truth the very thing that Hewitt at once proceeded to do. At dinner-time that day he went to the governor's office. A few preliminary words with the chief warder enabled him to get a sight of the register, wherein he discovered the names and records of the twenty convicts who had lately arrived from Grimley. He said nothing of his suspicions, but took an early opportunity of going into the tailors' shop. There he casually asked one of the warders to point out the man Laurence Gray.

"There he is," said the warder, indicating Jacques de Lacy. "That young lag there at the end of the repairing bench."

Hewitt approached the man and silently scrutinised him. A grim smile came to his lips as he thought of a means of testing the convict's identity.

De Lacy was repairing a prison jacket. He observed the warder standing near him.

"What sort o' cloth would yo call that as yo're workin' on?" Hewitt asked.

"Shoddy, downright shoddy," promptly answered De Lacy. "This stuff never saw Lancashire, I lay."

"Yo're a judge o' cloth, are yo?"

"Well, I ought to be, sir, seeing that I was once a cut-looker in a Blackburn factory."

"Ah? And whose factory were that?"

De Lacy looked up knowingly. In his few minutes' talk with Laurence on the previous Sunday he had been informed on all matters connected with Mr. Hewitt.

"You ought to know that yourself, sir," he replied. "You were timekeeper in the same place when I was serving my 'prenticeship. Don't you remember Laurence Gray?"

"I remember the name, but—"

"Yes, I daresay I'm altered, sir," coolly broke in De Lacy, stitching away industriously meanwhile. But this sort of existence would alter any man. Adonis himself wouldn't look very handsome rigged out in this style."

For a moment Hewitt was nonplussed. But the convict's evident knowledge of the antecedents of the true Laurence Gray did not wholly deceive him. He went away from the tailors' shop perplexed indeed, but more than ever convinced that Gray and De Lacy were acting in collusion.

The next morning, when he went out with his gang to the railway works, he determined to confront Laurence Gray with a full accusation of conspiracy. Warder Hewitt was an official who was thoroughly imbued with the sense of duty, and he resolved to do his duty now by exposing what he believed to be an unparalleled piece of audacity. It was not until about an hour before noon that he saw a suitable opportunity. He walked up, rifle under arm, to the spot where Gray was working, and looked at him through his keen little eyes.

"I know what thee little game is now, my lad," he said. "I've found oot aw about thee. Ay, and t' governor shall hear tell of it afore neet. Yo've managed it graidely well so far. But yo'll ha' to make another change o' badges wi' yon other chap in t' tailors' shop."

Laurence started upright, and looked into the warder's severe face. Therein he read his doom.

Still he said nothing, and made no movement of either anger or fear. But when Hewitt had walked away, a change that was like a blight came over his features, and a violent trembling seized him, making his strong arms helpless at their work. The autumn daylight

was about him still, but he felt as if a thick veil of darkness had fallen between him and the sky. His spirit, which had of late soared to heaven, was now sinking down, down, into the lowest abyss of despair.

It was all over. Now—almost at the last moment, at the very brink of freedom—the cup of relief and blessedness was dashed from his lips. There was no more hope. He knew that Hewitt would do as he threatened. And then farewell to liberty, to love, to his dream of re-establishing his innocence.

Why not farewell to life also? For the second time during his term of servitude the horrible temptation of suicide assailed him. Half-maddened by the anguish of disappointment, terror-stricken at the blackness of the future that now lay before him, he lifted his eyes to the engine that snorted and puffed near by on the completed line of rails. One moment's agony under those pitiless wheels and all would be finished.

"Presently, when it moves, I'll do it," he said to himself, and his features hardened with the terrible resolve.

He was working on the down line, laying sleepers, side by side with the convict Johnnie—the ex-missionary. They were not watched very closely by the warders, and he would be able presently to take his leap forward, without attracting notice until too late.

His eyes wandered from the locomotive across the line to the pathway beyond. There, like a moving sunbeam, a little fairheaded child was toddling happily along, coming towards the railway. She was smiling to herself as she came, and holding up her white pinafore with both chubby hands. In her four-year-old innocence she did not seem at all distressed by the idea that she was drawing near to a gang of convicts.

It was nearly two years since Laurence had seen a little child. Now, at sight of this baby-girl, a deep sob rose in his throat and his eyes filled with tears. To him she seemed an angel from God coming to alleviate his silent anguish and save him from himself. His thoughts of suicide fled like demons before the brightness of her advancing presence. As he stood watching

her his face softened, until, framed as it again was with thick, brown, curling locks, it looked like the face of the Laurence Gray of old. And slowly, one by one, the tears rolled down his cheeks—great tears that mourned his whole life laid in ashes, and yet brought with them such relief that his sore heart could say with resignation : " Thy will be done."

Suddenly there was a commotion at his side. The man Johnnie had flung down his crowbar and had bolted. He was now running at the top of his speed down the line. A confusion of shouting arose ; a warder blew his shrill whistle and gave chase, joined by several others, but the escaping convict had a good start, and soon out-distanced his pursuers. A few shots were fired, but still the man ran on and on. Then the driver of the waiting engine, seeing the desperateness of the situation, sprang upon the locomotive and started it in pursuit. There would be no chance now for the fugitive, for at the point which he had reached, barricades on either side compelled him to keep to the line.

This Laurence saw. But he saw something more. The little child who had been to him as an angel was crossing the railway ! The engine-driver, in his haste, had not seen her. In another moment her sweet little body would be under the iron wheels.

Forgetting himself, forgetting everything but her danger, Laurence rushed forward. The earth reeled about him. For an instant he was conscious of nothing but that little figure on the rails and the huge dark mass that was bearing down upon him, mighty, relentless, belching forth jets of steam. So close the iron monster came that for three or four awful seconds he believed that both the child and himself would be killed. Snatching her up, he made one blind, desperate leap aside. His sleeve grazed the engine's buffer, but he sprang clear and landed safely on the opposite bank. The child was saved.

Passionately he held her to him, thrilling with joy at the confiding clasp of her little round arms, as, frightened still, she clung to him and cried. She was

not afraid of him; he was under no ban for her. Probably she did not even know the meaning of the often-repeated broad-arrow on his coarse clothing. He was her saviour, and she trusted him. He had won a claim on the affection of her baby heart.

A moment later a man's voice, strangled with sobs, cried:

"Lillie! Lillie!"

She turned at the sound, and struggled in Laurence's clasp, answering joyously:

"Farver, farver—me not hurt; puff puff not touch me!"

Laurence looked up with a pang of jealousy. It was Warder Hewitt who had come. He took his child up in his arms and strained her to him, sobbing like a woman. Suppressing his agitation for a moment, he convulsively caught Laurence by the wrist.

"God bless thee, lad! God bless thee for this!" he cried brokenly, meeting Gray's astonished look.

"Are *you* her father?" asked Laurence hoarsely.

There was no need for a spoken reply. Hewitt's emotion was answer enough.

Suddenly, acting on a swift impulse, Gray sprang up and touched the warder's arm. His face was full of desperate appeal. His words came disjointedly and fast.

"Listen to me a moment, sir. Your suspicions about me are right. I am Laurence Gray, and that man in the tailors' shop is Jim Lacy. We exchanged clothes, and he agreed to work out my life term, and let me get free in his place. I am innocent of the crime for which I am condemned. Before God I swear I am as innocent as this child. I want to get out to prove my innocence. I want to go to one whom I love as dearly as you love this infant and your wife. Sir, have pity on me! Don't betray me. I throw myself on your mercy. For the love of God be silent and let me get free!"

For a moment the warder and the convict confronted each other in silence. Between them, like a living bond, prattled the child, whose voice but for Gray's bravery would now have been stilled in death. At last Hewitt said unsteadily:

"Aw reet, lad. *I* wonna say nowt. Yo're safe fro' me."

And, carrying the child, he walked away, just as, from the opposite side of the line, a shout went up that the fugitive "Johnnie" had been overtaken by the engine and securely recaptured.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

GERALDINE'S JOURNEY

In the grey light of a November noon Geraldine Lucas alighted from the London train at the station of the little town of Sandham, six miles from Jedwood Prison.

She was dressed darkly and plainly, and was heavily veiled, but even through these sombre wrappings her unusual beauty made itself known. There was something about the poise of her head and the movement of her figure that attracted every eye towards her. The people on the platform watched her admiringly as she passed among them. But she scarcely saw them. Her mind was straining towards one cherished object, and the scene about her was unreal to her as a dream.

On the previous evening, when she had recovered consciousness after hearing Vickers's announcement of Laurence Gray's death, she had gone to her room, slowly and mechanically, numbed by the very intensity of the shock that she had received. Alone there she felt the numbness pass away. In its stead a terrible despair overwhelmed her. She lay on her couch, a prey to mental anguish that seemed to shrivel up her youth and bring her near to the fate that alone now she thought could unite her to her lover. For hours she lay thus in the deep darkness of the November night, until utter exhaustion brought her oblivion in a second and prolonged unconsciousness.

When she recovered from this it was nearly morning. Instead of renewed despair, a sudden hope entered her mind. What proof had she of Laurence's death? None whatever. Ralph Vickers believed in it himself —conviction had rung in his voice as he told her of it

—but that was no real proof. There must have been some error. She could not think it possible that Laurence could die thus and be buried without any notification of the fact being sent to his friends. Then, too, the fondly superstitious thought came to her that if Laurence had died he would have returned to her in spirit—would have sent her some message to tell her. He would not have let her live so many months without knowing.

"No, no, it cannot be!" she said to herself again as on the evening before. "There is some mistake—some mystery. But I will learn the truth."

Trembling and weakened by that night of sleepless grief, she rose, though it was yet dark, and began to dress. As soon as the household was astir she went to see her father. He was still in the same condition. If any change had come at all it was for the worse. Geraldine's tears fell on his face as she kissed him. In his pain and weakness he did not observe how deadly white she was, and how deep and dark were the purple circles beneath her eyes.

Saying no word to him of what Ralph Vickers had told her, she left him an hour later and drove down to the office of the Director of Convict Prisons, in Parliament Street. Only Heaven knew what agony of suspense and dread was in her heart as she asked for news of Laurence Gray, "now undergoing a sentence of penal servitude for life at Grimley Prison." Her limbs trembled under her. Her heart seemed as if it would presently cease to beat.

The official to whom she had applied looked through his books. There was a pause. The few short minutes were long as hours to Geraldine.

"The convict Gray is not now at Grimley," said the official at last. "He was removed nearly four months ago to Jedwood Prison, near Sandham."

Removed—only four months ago. Then he was alive—alive! Nothing could surely have happened since then.

"Is he well?" she asked, in a low, quivering voice. The official stared.

"Perfectly well, according to the last report."

Geraldine caught her breath. The relief, the sudden revulsion of feeling, was almost more than she could bear. She put out her hand and caught for support at the wooden rail of a bureau that stood near.

"Can I—have an order—to see him?" she inquired, the words coming forth brokenly from her pale lips.

"I will see."

After a long delay and many questions and formalities the order was granted her, subject of course, to the consent of the governor of Jedwood.

She took it and left the office. Her step had regained its firmness, and her face something of its natural tender delicacy of hue. New strength was in her limbs, and thankfulness and hope drove the blood faster through her veins.

And now, only a few hours later, she was drawing near to Jedwood Prison. It was nearly two years since she had seen Laurence—two years all but three months since that memorable evening when their first kiss of betrothal had been followed by the thunderclap of his unjust arrest. Great Heaven! when would it end, this perversion of justice, this long and terrible martyrdom? Was it to go on for ever? Would their love find its consummation only in the grave?

That morning a letter had come to her from the solicitor whom she had employed on Laurence's behalf, stating that he wished to see her. She had not had time to obey his summons, but it had revived her hope. Perhaps he had made some important discovery or found a clue at last to Kesteven's real murderer.

She would go to him to-morrow. Meanwhile she would see again the dear face that she loved, hear again for a brief half-hour the strong, manly voice whose tones were vivid in her memory as if she had heard them but yesterday. From this interview she would return refreshed, with renewed trust in God's providence and more strength to endure the bitter waiting that was yet to come—more strength, too, to say, if need be, to her dying father, "I cannot do as you ask me. I must be true to Laurence."

Her heart beat wildly as she looked out through

the window of the hired carriage and saw the grey bare walls of the great prison rise in grim menace from the level plain. A flood of joy rushed over her. Laurence —he whom she loved, he who loved her—was there within those walls. This thought made the vast penal stronghold almost dear to her. But when, a few moments later, she stood at its ponderous gates, her joy gave way to dread and to an unutterable desolateness. Dread lest, as before at Grimley, some impediment should arise to deny her the interview she craved, and desolateness as she felt her own bitter loneliness standing there with no real friend in all the world save a father, who perhaps was dying, and a lover who was a convict, branded and shut off from the rest of mankind. She shuddered as the heavy gates opened before her, and she passed into the court-yard of the prison.

CHAPTER XXXIX

A STRANGE INTERVIEW

The governor, Major Walsh, scanned her curiously as she entered his office. It was not often that such a visitor graced that gloomy place. Indeed, when for an instant she raised her veil, the major thought it was not often that so sweet a face shone on any part of the world.

From herself he turned his attention to the order she presented. He scrutinised it keenly and in silence, while her heart grew chill with the fear that he would place some obstacle in the way of this privilege of which she stood so desperately in need.

At first it appeared that such would be the case. The governor, referring to a book, began to mutter words of doubt. The record against the convict Gray was bad. He had lost all his marks and had not yet retrieved them. But Geraldine, pale and agitated, pleaded eloquently; and finally, after consulting with the chief warder, he consented. He directed that she should be conducted to the receiving-room, and that

the prisoner Laurence Gray should be brought thither to see her.

Geraldine waited, motionless and silent, quieting her straining heart that throbbed violently with eager longing and expectant joy. Presently, at the request of the chief warder, she went behind a row of iron bars that divided off a portion of the room. Another row of bars faced this one, and between the two the chief warder installed himself as witness of the approaching interview.

A feeling of indignation rose in Geraldine. Was she to meet her lover thus, with a double iron barrier between like the bars of a wild beast's cage—with no handshake, no touch of the loving fingers that, as with electric power, could convey so many messages of comfort, so many promises of eternal faithfulness? And must their passionate love, their grief, all the long agony of both their hearts be poured forth in the hearing of this rigid-featured warder, to whom all suffering must be a mockery and a jest?

While yet these thoughts were surging in her mind, the door of the room opened and the prisoner appeared conducted by an assistant warder. A film seemed suddenly to spread itself before Geraldine's eyes; eagerness and the overwhelming joy of feeling that once again she was in Laurence's presence momentarily blinded her, so that she saw nothing but two vague forms advancing slowly as through a mist. Then the film vanished and all became clear. Across the few feet of intervening space her lifted eyes encountered those of the convict who confronted her from behind the opposite bars.

In absolute silence she gazed at him, at first with horror, then with doubt, then with a cold perplexity that arrested the palpitation of her heart and slackened the course of the blood in her veins. He was not Laurence, but a man somewhat resembling him in height and colouring, nervous, graceful even in his hideous suit of degradation, and with eager, unquiet eyes.

CHAPTER XL

THE SUBSTITUTE

GERALDINE turned to the chief warder.

"It was the prisoner Laurence Gray I asked to see."

"This is he," was the rigid reply.

She was about to protest when the convict's voice reached her. De Lacy—for it was he—was quivering in his every fibre with almost uncontrollable emotion. For five long years he had not looked upon a woman's face, and this sudden confrontation with one so sweet, so purely beautiful, sent thrills through all his being, and made his ordinarily untroubled heart ache with new longing after a better life. A great shame overwhelmed him. He would have let the earth engulf him rather than that this good woman should look upon him longer in his ignominious condition. But even for her sake he had to speak. For her sake he would do his duty to Laurence Gray. He felt sure now that a man who loved and was beloved by an angel such as this would nobly keep the promise he had made to help his poor friend's mother.

With an effort De Lacy forced himself to play his part.

"Geraldine," he said, in a reproachful tone, "am I then so changed that you do not recognise me?"

At the sound of her name a thrill ran through her. The strange voice had been unsteady too, as if with uncertainty or emotion. She looked intently at the convict, and read in his eyes—brown eyes like Laurence's, yet how different in expression!—something struggling for utterance—a warning, an entreaty, almost a fear.

The chief warder, sitting between them, noticed nothing of this. He was accustomed to witnessing the consternation and horror of persons who first saw their relatives or friends shaven and cropped and in the prison dress.

De Lacy hurried on before Geraldine had time to speak again. He spoke glibly, as if repeating a lesson:

"I am so glad you have come! I was afraid you

had forgotten me, that others—Ralph Vickers, for instance—had poisoned your mind against me. My heart nearly broke last year when you came to Grimley and I did not see you. But evil circumstances held me back, as they hold back many a poor prisoner who would give his life to see the woman he loves"

Startled and amazed, Geraldine listened. This strange man knew who she was, spoke words that Laurence himself might have spoken! A sickening dread came over. *Was Laurence dead indeed?*

Her eyes dilated with the icy fear. Her unveiled face grew white to the very lips. It was well that she was strong-natured. Had she been weak, Laurence Gray's fate would in that moment have been sealed. A single exclamation of protest would have lost him to her for ever.

It was strange that the cry did not come; for horrible thoughts thronged upon her, torturing suspicions that here was some demon's work of Ralph Vickers's doing. How was it that, ask whom she might, go where she would—even here in the prison itself—she could neither hear satisfactory news of Laurence nor penetrate to him?

This question burned in her brain like fire. Was Laurence living or was he dead? If he were living, why should another man personate him? If dead—

She clutched the bars before her for support. There was no time for thought now. She must act. But even in the midst of her terrible fears, feminine intuition came to her aid. She judged the face of the convict before her, and saw that it was not wholly evil. She saw, too, that he was anxious; his eyes, his silently moving lips, even his hands, and the attitude of his body, seemed to transmit to her the word, deep and impressive, "Hush!"

For a moment the truth suggested itself to her—that for some hidden reason Laurence had changed characters with this man. The stranger's knowledge of her proved at least that Laurence had confided in him. Clinging to the comfort of this possibility, she forced herself to calmness. A man in whom Laurence had confided was worthy of being trusted by her. It was

evident that some scheme was on foot, but in her ignorance of its nature she resolved to make as yet no sign of her discovery. Here, where the very walls had ears, the slightest word of inquiry might do irreparable harm, and this stranger's feverish haste to pour into her ears words that she would have expected no man but Laurence to speak seemed to confirm her assumption that Laurence himself had, for some incomprehensible reason, instructed him to be his deputy.

Yet—the doubt sprang into her mind—if Laurence were living, would he not come to her at all hazards? Would he let another man come in his stead?

Then, as if Heaven had sent them for an answer, the words this man had just spoken came back to her, distinct and full of meaning: "Evil circumstances held me back—*as they hold back many a poor prisoner who would give his life to see the woman he loves.*"

These words were as a revelation. She determined to be silent, and, in so far as was consistent with truth and dignity, to aid the convict before her in the playing of his part. She might gather news of Laurence from his guarded speech; also it was probable that he would find means to repeat to Laurence all that she had said.

It was time now for her to speak, for the interview could only be brief. Her silence, too, would presently become suspicious to the waiting chief warder, although her crowding doubts and conflicting feelings had occupied only a few short moments.

"I have bad news this time," she said. "My father is very ill—perhaps dying. In a few days I may be alone in the world."

De Lacy's eyes looked across into hers firmly, steadily, charged with mysterious meaning.

"Not alone," he answered her. "God will watch over you. Remember that." He paused, and then added, "I hope that your father will live to see my innocence proved. I still trust—and believe—he will do so."

The words "and believe" were spoken with an emphasis that conveyed a probability, almost a promise. Geraldine started and thrilled. She had cast off her

weakness, and now, standing there erect and stately behind the dividing bars, she threw all her soul's yearning appeal into her glorious eyes. They asked him the secret of this mystery, the meaning of his bold assumption of another man's identity. Something of command, too, was there, compelling his reply.

"Help comes always in the hour of greatest need," he said adroitly. "When our troubles are at their worst, deliverance is close at hand. It is not long since I was in despair; but now I am calm and full of hope. Let my hope comfort you. Look forward to the day when we shall be reunited."

"He still speaks in Laurence's name," Geraldine thought. Aloud she said: "Why have you not written to me? Have you been ill?"

"Very ill—for months," he replied; "and I lost my marks and could not write. I've had a bad time of it—but the worst of all was that I thought you must be forgetting me, or thinking from my silence that I'd forgotten you, or had got too bad to be worth your caring for. And then the idea came into my head that Ralph Vickers was blackening me to you and that perhaps you were going to marry him. You, who are out in the free world, cannot imagine how quickly doubts come into the heart of a prisoner, and how black and thick those doubts are."

The convincing force of truth told Geraldine that these experiences were indeed those which Laurence had gone through. But where was Laurence? Let the mystery be what it might she could not endure to prolong this scene. Its falseness was too painful to her. She would have given all she possessed to have five minutes' private speech with the strange prisoner before her; but that was impossible. She saw clearly that nothing worth her hearing could be spoken in the presence of the warder. Yet she must say something more to justify herself in having sought the interview.

"Doubts and suffering have come to me also," she murmured. "But I cannot speak of that now. I will only ask you if there is any message to be sent to my father, in case he should die."

Keenly she searched De Lacy's eyes, but he shook his head perplexedly.

"I have none to send him," he answered.

She turned half away, then faced him again.

"I am restless and unhappy," she cried almost angrily. "Your words are unsatisfactory to me. I am in a desperate situation. My father urges me to marry this man Ralph Vickers. I came here for help, for counsel. *You* have given me neither."

She saw a shadow of anxiety cross the strange convict's face. He stretched out his hand, as if at once to silence her and to impress her with the solemnity of the words he spoke.

"I give you both. I say to you, wait and hope. Hope, even though the worst happens, and help seems impossible. You must not marry that man. He is a scoundrel. Be faithful through all things to your poor Laurence. If you are true, Providence will take care of the rest."

There was something prophetic in the tone in which these words were uttered. Geraldine felt it, and grew calmer.

A ray of pale sunlight filtered in through one of the high windows of the room and shone upon her face, illumining its beauty. The chief warder momentarily turned his eyes from the prisoner and rested them upon her. De Lacy seized the opportunity to throw into his own countenance whole volumes of meaning. He smiled reassuringly, while his eyes expressed in turn, clearly as words could have spoken: "Be silent; have no fear. All is well."

CHAPTER XLI

THE DARKEST HOUR

Dazed with doubt and perplexity, racked with anxiety, yet restrained by prudence from inquiring at once of the governor, Geraldine passed out from the grim prison, drove back over the flat, bare country, and was soon in the train speeding homeward to London.

Then, and then only, did she try to think over what had taken place. But she found she could not think. Utterly exhausted in both body and mind by the strange and startling emotions through which she had passed, she leaned back in her seat in the railway carriage in a state of semi-consciousness, open-eyed, yet neither seeing nor hearing anything of the world about her. Hours passed, and the dusk came on, but she did not know it. It was only the noisy arrival of the train at the London terminus that at last roused her from her torpor, bringing back the day's events with terrible vividness to her distressed mind.

Then the remembrance of the strange convict's reassuring manner ceased to comfort her. The hope that had sprung up in her at his words died utterly away, and her first vague dread returned upon her, horrible, chilling her blood. Until to-day she had believed that the very prison walls that kept Laurence from her love would equally keep him safe from the hate of an enemy. But now she doubted this. She feared that Ralph Vickers's arm, guided by subtlest cunning, had somehow reached and stricken him. Yet how—how? It was the mystery that appalled her. Because she knew nothing she dreaded everything. Turn where she might she found only darkness. And Vickers never spoke idly. He had believed what he was saying when he told her that his rival was dead.

In the sharpness of her re-awakened anguish she resolved to find out the truth at all hazards. There was no time to go to Parliament Street that night, but on the following morning she would go, and would give information concerning the fraud that had been practised upon her. Vickers would not have expected her to take so bold a step, and the exposure of his malpractices—should he be guilty of any—would, therefore, come upon him like a thunderbolt.

As she drew near Fenton Court a new dread overshadowed her—the dread lest her father should be worse. On entering the house, she hurried upstairs to his room. A nurse, grave and anxious, met her with the intimation that the doctors desired her not to go in. Her father

was in delirium. His illness had reached its crisis. This night would decide whether he was to live or die.

Geraldine, stricken with grief and awe, leaned back against the wall of the dim corridor.

"Has he asked for me?" she breathed. "Has my note been given to him?"

"He has been too ill," the nurse replied. "He hasn't known anybody."

"Mr. Vickers only went away about half an hour ago, miss," Geraldine's maid said to her a few minutes later. "He's been with master all the afternoon."

Geraldine shuddered amid her rising sobs. She felt as if it was no ordinary man, but an evil spirit in man's semblance, that haunted her father and herself under the name of Ralph Vickers. For an instant the horrible thought came to her that it might be to Vickers's presence that her father owed his illness—that Vickers was a vampire sucking the old man's life away. The ghastly idea grew in her perturbed mind till it seemed almost possible. She began to fancy that her father had always been worse after Vickers's lengthy visits.

She went down to the library, where dinner was served for her. But she could not eat. She went to the fireplace and stood with her hot forehead pressed down upon the cold marble of the mantelpiece, waiting with an aching heart for news from the sick-room above.

What would the morrow bring her? Would her father have passed from her? Would she learn that her lover was dead? Oh, if indeed they both were lost to her, how should she survive the grief? How could she live, left thus utterly alone?

So absorbed was she in her own thoughts that a knocking at the door had to be twice repeated before she heard it. The footman entered with a note. She took it carelessly. But at sight of the handwriting her heart stood still. The paper shook between her fingers as she read the few lines roughly traced upon it.

"It is impossible!" she murmured between her blanching lips.

She read the note again, scanning it more minutely. Then she asked, looking up:

"Where is the gentleman?"

"He said he'd wait in the hall, miss."

"Show him in here—at once!"

She did not move, but her rigid limbs and absolutely bloodless face denoted an intense inward agitation. In her motionless white figure only her eyes seemed alive—her beautiful eyes that, dilating with craving eagerness, were fixed upon the door. Presently the door opened, and the footman reappeared, ushering in a tall man, so muffled in high throat-wrappings and low, close-fitting cap that little of his face was discernible. Then the door shut again, the mufflings were loosened, the cap was thrown off, and Geraldine sprang forward with a cry of wild, unutterable joy, amazement, and relief.

"Merciful Heaven! Laurence! Is it you indeed?"

"Yes, Geraldine. It is I—I thank God!"

CHAPTER XLII

THE "TICKET-OF-LEAVE" MAN

A LONG, long silence followed that shock of meeting—a silence of joy so perfect, so overwhelming, that it found its best expression in speechless embrace. Motionless they stood, clasped in each other's arms, heart straining wildly to heart. Geraldine's face was hidden against her lover's shoulder, and his hand, less delicate than of old, and trembling now with emotion, was resting tenderly upon her hair.

The joyful minutes flew past. At last Geraldine, with a long, deep sigh, raised her head, and, the better to look at her lover, gently withdrew herself from his arms. She saw that he was greatly changed. He looked many years older; his face had lost the freshness of youth, and there were deep lines about his eyes and across his brow. For purposes of disguise he had not shaven off his lately grown beard, and his hair at the temples was tinged with grey. Still, his appearance had nothing in common with that of the shaven convict whom she had interviewed but a few hours

before. The brown locks clustered about his head as long and thickly as when she had seen him last, and his clothing was such as she had been accustomed to see him wear.

"You have escaped?" she breathed.

"Yes, but," he glanced nervously around. "I am in danger still. If any one recognises me I am lost. Who is in this house now; only your father?"

"No one else, except the servants. But I will lock the doors; then we shall be safe."

There were two doors to the library. She locked them both and then came back to him.

"Take off your overcoat."

"No, no. I cannot—I dare not. I must keep myself ready to escape if anything should happen—if *he*—Vickers—should come, for instance. He comes here still?"

"Yes."

Laurence's eyes grew darker.

"I feared so. I hate him. I have vengeance to take on him."

Suddenly his look changed, a quick fear shadowed his face, and he drew back.

"Geraldine, are you still free—still wholly mine—not his?"

But that the shaking of his voice betrayed that his whole life's happiness hung on her answer, she would have been indignant at the question.

"Laurence!" she exclaimed reproachfully.

Her tone said the rest. His deep, reverent eyes implored her pardon.

"Forgive me, my beloved. I was mad to doubt you, even for an instant. But in prison foolish thoughts came and tortured me—"

He broke off in his hurried speech, absorbed in looking at her face. Its beauty had not diminished; it was the same as he had seen it in his waking reveries and in his feverish dreams. But now it was transfigured, glorified with passionate joy. The cheeks were flushed, the eyes had a celestial radiance such as comes

to even the loveliest eyes but twice or thrice in a lifetime—in love's supremest moments.

His own face worked with emotion. He put out his arms and drew her to him again, holding her with the close, desperate clasp of a man who feels that at any moment his treasure may be torn from him for ever.

"Let me forget everything but you for a little while," he murmured. "Let me feel all the joy of this reunion. I have prayed for it so long. Oh, my darling! my darling!"

"You love me as much as ever, Laurence?"

"More—a thousand times more! More than I ever thought a man could love. Geraldine, the love of you has been as a lamp to guide me through all the mazes of crime and suffering in which my lot has lately been cast. The love of you has kept me from suicide. The hope of meeting you again has made me struggle on through hours of bitterest anguish and blackest despair. And—what is more than all—my resolve to remain worthy of you has strengthened me to keep my heart pure for your sake. Dearest, in every hour of this long time that has passed since we parted I have loved you, have yearned for you, have clung to you in spirit—striving meanwhile to do right and to be patient, because right-doing and patience brought me nearer to you. There were times when I thought it was all in vain, when I believed that nothing could break down the barriers that kept us apart. But they are broken, and I am here—here with you, holding you in my arms, looking in your face, telling once more to your living self what for so long I have told only to your image in my heart—that I love you! I love you! I love you!"

Her tears, so lately dried, were flowing fast again. She clung to him in her passion of joy.

"Forgive me," she cried, trying to beat back the sobs that rose tumultuously in her throat. "This is not grief—it is happiness. I—I have suffered so much lately, and this sudden joy is more than I can bear. I shall be better soon."

"Then you are not ashamed to touch me?" he

murmured. "You are not ashamed to be clasped in the arms of a convict—one, too, who is no longer the Laurence Gray who first loved you, but an altered man, sadder, and bitter-hearted, and prematurely old ?"

For answer, Geraldine put up her arms and drawing his face down to hers, tenderly kissed his cheeks and brow.

"Never speak to me like that again Laurence. Nothing but guilt can debase a man. Your innocent sufferings have only made you nobler and grander in my sight. Even the traces of them on your face give a new dignity in return for what they have taken away. Oh, I bless God for granting that you might come to me now in my time of trial! I have been in terrible suspense and anguish. I feared you were dead—"

"Feared I was dead! How? Because I did not write?"

"Not that alone—although your silence seemed to confirm the report. But come here by the fire, and I will tell you all. You must sit down and rest. You look tired and worn."

"Hush!" he said suddenly, pausing in his walk across the room. "I hear footsteps outside. Someone is coming here."

Scarcely had he spoken when a light knocking came at the door.

"Wait an instant," said Geraldine aloud. To him she whispered, "You are quite safe. No one shall come in. It must be a servant, bringing news of my father, who is ill."

It proved to be her own maid, sent to tell her that Mr. Lucas was better. He had fallen into a quiet sleep. All danger was now past.

The strange coincidence of this change with Laurence's arrival made her feel as if the return of the innocent man had lifted from the house some mysterious curse which the constant presence of Ralph Vickers had laid upon it. The double relief strengthened her as with new blood. She crossed the room with the firm, stately step that Laurence knew of old.

"My father has been dangerously ill," she said

hurriedly. "But the crisis is over now, and he will recover." She clasped her hands upon her breast. "God has been merciful to me," she breathed. "I was as one perishing. In the half-hour before you came I learned the meaning of real despair. I dared not think of to-morrow—I believed it would see my father's death, and bring me the certainty of yours. I pictured you lying in a prison graveyard—you whom I loved so—and now all is changed! Heaven is opening before me."

"Geraldine, what does this mean?" Laurence Gray asked gravely. "Who told you that I was dead?"

"Ralph Vickers. Throughout this past year he has persecuted me with his attentions. He won my father over to his side, so that my father appealed to me on his behalf. Then came this illness. My father could not bear to think that I should be left alone in the world. He implored me to promise him that, in case of his death, I would become Vickers's wife. I refused. Vickers thought my refusal was owing solely to my faithfulness to you. He cannot understand that I abhor him for himself. He came to me last night—it was only last night—here in this very room, and told me solemnly that you were dead—that you had been dead more than ten months."

The light from the log-fire flickering on Laurence Gray's face showed its paleness slowly darkening to a deep angry red.

"May that lie wither up his soul!" he cried passionately. But Geraldine laid her hand upon his arm.

"Laurence, it was not a conscious lie. He believed it to be the truth. It was the ring of conviction in his voice that struck anguish into my heart. If he had spoken falsely, I should have known it. I am accustomed to his falseness. It was the ring of truth that beat me down and left me despairing. He said you had been shot in trying to escape—"

Laurence Gray sprang from his chair.

"He said that? Then he knew!"

Geraldine drew back, startled at his tone.

"Knew what?" she asked.

"What had happened in the prison. I *was* shot in

trying to escape—shot at and wounded, but not killed. That is where his error lay. I was not killed. I have lived to come back, and shall live, please God, to take vengeance for the wrongs he has done me."

"Have you proof of any wrongs?" eagerly asked Geraldine. "I have suspected him for months, but have never been able to find proof on which deliberately to accuse him. In the beginning he tried to do you good."

Laurence, who had been pacing the hearthrug, stopped suddenly before her.

"How?"

"He found out one of the warders who had charge of you, and paid him to treat you well. He made a journey to Grimley for that purpose."

"*He*, Vickers, went to Grimley?" Laurence bent forward and touched her arm. "And the money?" he asked breathlessly. "Did *you* give it?"

"It was all I could do for you, Laurence."

He stood for an instant as one turned to stone, while in his perplexed soul a light dawned slowly, revealing to his horrified sight a deep abyss of evil, of hate-inspired treachery and villainous wrong. Then an indignation, such as he had never felt before—had never dreamed it possible that he could feel—rose within him, terrible in its quiet force, making his chest heave and the veins of his throat and brow stand out like cords.

"He used it for my torture," he muttered hoarsely. "He deceived you, Geraldine. He made your very love a means by which to sharpen my suffering! With the money you gave, he bought me a crueller oppression, keener insults, a deeper degradation. I was treated worse than any other man in the whole prison. I—innocent of any crime—was subjected to punishment and indignities such as are only inflicted on the most brutal among the criminals. And it was through him—through his bribes that he paid with money given by you to alleviate my wretchedness! Great Heaven!" he exclaimed passionately, "can God let such things pass unavenged? Looking back now, I see it all. I suspect horrible things. No man would do for jealousy's sake

alone all that Ralph Vickers has done to me. I have been his victim all through. He laid a trap for me —cast another man's guilt upon me—whose, Geraldine, whose? We will have the answer to that ere long."

He paced the long room with hurried steps. Then he stopped before Geraldine again.

"He has ruined my life—thrust me from the path of success—taken away all that made life sweet. He tried to rob me of your love; but, thank God he has failed in that! It is to him I owe it that I stand here now unworthy of you. Geraldine, my noble, stainless love, how can you look at me—how can you let me touch you, or even come into your presence? Your lover should be a king among men. I dreamed of being so, for your sake. I would have tried to be so with my whole soul and strength; but I have been the sport of a devil in human shape. It is to Ralph Vickers I owe it that I stand here now before you, ruined, debased, degraded, bearing the loathed title from which even your love revolts—that of a 'ticket-of-leave' man!"

CHAPTER XLIII

A SWEET GOOD NIGHT

He sank down into a chair, and, turning away from her, buried his face in his hands.

"Laurence, my beloved always through all grief and degradation," she whispered soothingly, trying to draw away the shielding hands. "The title does not drag you down. You lift it up. When a man is innocent no villainous name can hurt him. He makes the worst name noble by his own nobility, so that the disgrace falls from him. That you should be a ticket-of-leave man only fills me with pity for other poor men who may be such, perhaps, as unjustly as yourself. But, Laurence, how comes it so? Look up, dearest, and tell me. You were sentenced for life. How is it that you are here—out of the convict dress, and with a ticket-of-leave?"

"By a bold scheme," he answered, but without raising his head. "I exchanged name, number, and clothes with a man whose sentence of five years will expire in four weeks' time, and in his name I was liberated at noon to-day on licence. I, as James Lacy, must report myself every month to the police, while he, as Laurence Gray, remains behind with the weight of my life sentence on his shoulders."

Geraldine started back in amazement at such a sacrifice.

"Then it must have been he whom I saw to-day!" she exclaimed after a pause.

Laurence sprang up.

"Whom you saw to-day?" he echoed in alarm. "How? Where?"

His face paled with the dread of what she might unwittingly have said or done.

She told him then of the position in which she had been placed by her father's illness and Vicker's persecution; of her great anxiety concerning himself, and her journey to Jedwood to see him, and to ask his advice and comfort. She described her feelings on seeing a strange man appear in his stead, and the way in which De Lacy had played his part.

Laurence listened with a changing countenance. When she had finished, he forgot his relief in passionate love and pity for her.

"How you have suffered, Geraldine! And I—I dared to doubt you! I have dared, too, to murmur against God—I, who am blessed with the love of a woman such as you, and have found a friend so faithful as De Lacy! Thank Heaven your woman's wit served you well to-day, or we should both have been lost."

"Thank Heaven, too, that you came here to-night!" she added fervently. "I had resolved to make inquiries to-morrow. I could not help it. My suspense was too terrible to endure."

"It is over now, my darling," he murmured tenderly.

"For a time," she returned, half doubtful still, afraid of this newly-come joy. "But, Laurence, how much we owe to that man who took your place!"

"The sacrifice was for his mother's sake, dearest. I have promised to find her and help her. I must begin to search for her to-morrow."

"Is she poor?" Geraldine asked. And then she added, suddenly recollecting his position: "And you, Laurence—have you all you want—money and a home?" She flushed as she spoke, afraid lest her words should wound him. "All that is mine is yours," she went on with a tender smile. "You must not scruple to ask me for what you need. If I were poor and in trouble I should not be ashamed to take help from you."

"Neither would I be ashamed," he replied, meeting the gaze of her shining eyes with a proud trustfulness that well became his still handsome face. "But I have money. John Howarth—the son of my old landlady—has paid me back part of the £200 I lent him two years ago. As for a home—I dare not return to Mrs. Howarth's. I have taken obscure lodgings in Soho, whence I can report myself to the police without any danger of betraying myself by connection with the old Laurence Gray."

"When did you leave Jedwood?" Geraldine asked, in a low voice.

"Five days ago; as De Lacy had been convicted in London, I, who was playing his part, had to be brought to London for my discharge. They sent me out from Jedwood in a suit of liberty clothing and with a few shillings in my pocket. They put me into an ordinary third-class carriage in charge of one of the prison warders. I was handcuffed—think of it! Handcuffed, though my hair and beard were grown, and I was in what they called civilian costume and going to liberty! Oh the shame of that journey! It burns in my brain still. Before, when I was removed from one prison to another, I was shaven and cropped, I wore the convict dress, and travelled in the prisoners' van. No one noticed me or knew me. But this last time—going to freedom I sat handcuffed and guarded among people any one of whom I might meet again to-night, to-morrow, at any time! They looked at me closely; their eyes seemed to brand me. Whenever I meet one of them

again—be it ten years hence—I shall be recognised, pointed at, shunned."

"No, no," protested Geraldine. "They will forget; and they are only a few out of the millions in England—in London even. It is your imagination that works on these things, making them worse than they are. Drive them out of your mind. Let the past be past."

"I cannot," was the passionate answer, hoarsely given. His features were working with his inward agitation. "I am filled with shame, throbbing and tingling with humiliation. If I live to be a hundred years old I shall remember to the last instant every incident of this past week. When I left the train I was taken, still handcuffed, in a cab to the Queen's Bench Prison. I was kept there until this morning, awaiting my final discharge. I was paraded before a crowd of detectives and policemen. I had to undergo the indignity of their scrutiny. They compared me with my photograph, so that if I sinned again they might recognise me and track me down. Think of the shame of it. And all the while I was in terror lest some one of them should see through the tragic masquerade and proclaim me an impostor."

"Is there danger still?" Geraldine asked breathlessly.

"Danger? At every moment—in every place. I am now well known to the police. As a man on ticket-of-leave, I shall be watched and followed wherever I go. Every one of my movements will be suspected. At any moment I may be recognised as Laurence Gray, and if that should happen I shall be rearrested and sent back to prison—back to life-long silence, life-long immolation! Oh!" he exclaimed, clenching his hands in horror, "it would end in madness this time, surely."

"Laurence!" Geraldine cried imploringly.

The wild look died out of his eyes. A smile came on his lips.

"At least I should have seen you," he said, in a trembling voice, "should have told you how true I was, and how, in spite of evil report, I have kept myself honest-hearted still. That memory might save me."

Alarm was in Geraldine's eyes.

"Laurence, you must run no risk," she said gravely. "Perhaps, even, you ought not to have come here. This neighbourhood is unsafe for you."

"My beard alters me a good deal," he replied, "and my heart longed so for the joy of seeing you that I could not endure delay, not even for prudence's sake. When I was set free, at noon to-day, I spent the few shillings that had been given me to face the world with in paying my cab-fare to Well Lane. I dared not walk in the streets in the clothes I then had on; I felt that something about them proclaimed that they had come from a prison, and had been made by convicts' hands."

He paused, drawing a deep breath. Geraldine looked at him anxiously.

"How did Mrs. Howarth receive you?"

"As gladly as if I had been her son. John was there, too, and he paid me back, as I told you, part of the money I had lent him to start business with. My boxes were there, kept ready for me, and I changed my clothes so that I might be fit to come to you. Oh, Geraldine, many a time in my cell I have felt that I would give my life to see you for one moment as I see you now!"

"For my sake, be careful of yourself," she urged. "Think what my grief would be if you were recaptured."

Her eyes grew more brilliant with unshed tears. Before he could answer the clock struck, recalling him to the outer world.

"Ten o'clock!" he exclaimed, in surprise. "I must go. If I stay longer my presence will arouse suspicion here. Yet I have so many things to tell you—all the history of these past two years. But that must be for another time than now."

"To-morrow evening," she murmured. "Until then God be with you. I shall be in terror until I see you again."

"Good-night, my dearest."

"Good-night—but wait!"

She took a pencil from the mantelpiece and hastily wrote something on a slip of paper.

"I had an appointment to go to-morrow to the

solicitor whom I had instructed to make investigations on your behalf. You must go in my place. To-morrow at twelve; here is the address. He says he has something important to communicate. May it be something—some revelation—that will help to prove your innocence. I will write to-night to tell him you are coming."

They went out of the room together, crossing the hall softly side by side. Quietly Geraldine unfastened the massive hall-door, and drew it back upon its noiseless hinges. They stood on the steps together in the pale autumn moonlight.

"God bless you, Geraldine."

"And you, too, my dearest—now and always. Good-night."

CHAPTER XLIV

UNDER THE BAN

Leaving Fenton Court and walking down towards Finchley Road, Laurence was careful to draw his hat well over his brows, and to muffle his face. He avoided the more populous thoroughfares, and at length hailed a passing hansom and drove down to Soho, where he felt more secure against recognition, and where, should he be suddenly accosted by a police officer, he might, with safety, pass himself off as James Lacy.

As soon as he reached his poor lodgings he put on a suit of worn and shabby clothes, and, in obedience to the conditions of his licence, which imposed upon him the necessity of giving his address to the police within four-and-twenty hours after his discharge, he went to Marlborough Street Police Station.

When his licence had been examined, and his name, or rather that of James Lacy, had been entered in the books, he gave the address of his lodgings. He was then abruptly asked how he intended to earn his living.

Taken aback by the question, Laurence hesitated, then reminded the officer that he had received a few shillings as "earnings" from the prison authorities.

"But that is already spent," said the officer; "you were seen in Oxford Street a few hours ago driving in a hansom. Where did you get the money to pay the fare?"

"I got it from a friend" said Laurence.

"A confederate, you mean, I suppose. Who was he—a returned convict like yourself?"

"No, certainly not"

"Give me his name and address"

"Am I bound to tell you?"

"You are bound to answer any question you are asked. It is necessary that you should show that you got the money honestly"

"I prefer not to tell you my friend's name. But the money was an old debt"

"Very well If you don't tell we'll soon find out by other means, and you must take the consequences. You must report yourself again within twenty four hours, and state exactly how you are earning your living. We must have the name of your employer, too, and if you don't give a satisfactory account of yourself, you'll be re arrested and sent back to complete your sentence"

Laurence went back to his lodgings feeling more than ever that he was a marked man.

Early on the following morning he went to the French Protestant Church and asked to see the pastor, to whom Jacques De Lacy had directed him as the person most likely to know of his mother's movements. Gray expected that Mrs De Lacy would be discovered living in the French quarter of Soho, and his recent intercourse with the criminal class gave him courage to penetrate into the darkest slums, should that be necessary. He was provided with a considerable sum of money which he had set aside for Mrs De Lacy's benefit

The pastor explained that he had not seen or heard of Mrs. De Lacy for a very long time He had entirely lost sight of her. But he directed Laurence to a street behind Newport Market, where the woman had lived some four years before.

Laurence spent the whole morning in his search tracing Mrs. De Lacy's successive removals from a

respectable dwelling-house to a poorer tenement, from the tenement to a garret, each remove indicating a gradual descent in the scale of poverty. At length he traced her to a narrow alley near Seven Dials. Here he hoped to find her. He made inquiries of several of the neighbours, but few seemed to remember her, fewer still could tell him anything concerning her. Ultimately he discovered the landlord of the little room in which she had lived.

"I am looking for a woman named De Lacy, or Lacy—a Frenchwoman," said Laurence; "can you tell me anything about her?"

The man scratched his head for a moment.

"Lacy, d'you say? Do I know 'er? Well, gov'nor, I *did* know 'er. 'Taint likely as I'd forgit 'er. She rented my top floor back—used to sell flowers. Yes, I know 'er. She owed me eight bob, which is four weeks' rent. Didn't she never pay me? W'y, no. 'Cos w'y? She couldn't, and never will now. I sold 'er sticks, which didn't fetch more'n 'arf a dollar. That's all the satisfaction I ever got out of 'er."

"Where is she living now?" asked Laurence.

"Living? She ain't a-livin' now'ere. She's dead—died o' starvation two years ago."

"Starvation!"

"Yes. Nobody seen 'er for three or four days, and w'en we opens 'er door, there we found 'er lyin' dead. She orter a-gone into the Union; but, bless yer life, she were too proud, she were."

Laurence paid the man the few shillings that were owing to him and turned away. He felt a deep melancholy come over him as he meditated upon the uselessness of his quest. He was too late. Mrs. De Lacy had died for lack of the help that her convict son had been so anxious to secure for her. Jacques De Lacy's sacrifice, his renunciation of freedom, had been all in vain.

For a moment Laurence asked himself if it was not now his duty to go back and surrender himself in order that his friend might be set free? But reflection assured him that the temporary detention of De Lacy in prison was best for the poor fellow's own sake. To liberate him

now, and turn him, orphaned and penniless, upon a cruel world, would be to work his ruin.

On the contrary, this fact of Mrs. De Lacy's death showed more plainly than ever that it was Laurence's first duty to clear his own name and establish his innocence before the world. Then, procuring De Lacy's release, he would help and protect him, and keep him from sinking back again into crime.

Laurence returned to his lodgings in Soho. During his absence a detective from Marlborough Street had called and had made several inquiries of the landlady, concerning the supposed James Lacy. The landlady, on hearing that her new lodger was a convict on ticket-of-leave, took alarm, declaring that she had been imposed upon, and when Laurence arrived she immediately demanded her week's rent, and ordered him to quit her premises. Laurence paid the money and took away his bag—his sole luggage. He wanted to change his clothes in order that he might keep the appointment Geraldine had made for him with the solicitor. But where now was this change to be effected? Walking along Gerard Street, he found that he was being followed by a man who bore the unmistakable marks of a detective. He went into a small hotel and asked for a private room. When, having changed his dress, he issued forth again, he found the detective still on the watch. The alteration in his appearance was suspicious in the eyes of this emissary of the police. But Laurence passed by the man boldly, and soon contrived to evade him.

This perpetual surveillance was becoming irksome to him. He was liable to be accosted and catechised at any moment, and he dared not attempt to avoid such encounters, since to do so would only awaken still deeper suspicion. He was beginning to understand the difficulties which confront a ticket-of-leave man who is striving to make a fresh start in the world. He could understand how a discharged prisoner without friends or money is made to feel the consequences of his fall throughout the whole of his after-life.

A bitter sense of loneliness, of desolation, filled his soul. He longed to go at once to Geraldine for comfort,

for the assurance that there was at least one human being who loved him and believed in him, one in whose eyes he was no pariah, but an honourable and an honoured man. But hours must pass yet before he could see her. The veil of dusk must fall before his journey would be safe.

He went now to the solicitor's chambers in Lincoln's Inn, feeling sick at heart. To prove his innocence after so long an interval seemed to him in this mood an impossible thing. He went in at the solicitor's door as one who had no hope.

When an hour later, he came forth again, he was a changed man. His eyes were brilliant with new light, his face was flushed, and his whole body was elastic as with the first boundless energy of youth. It was still too early to go to Fenton Court. But he could not rest. He walked about the noisy, crowded streets until the dusk came, and then he sped to Geraldine.

CHAPTER XLV

AT THE BEDSIDE

BRIEFLY, but with emotion, he told what the lawyer had said. When he had finished, Geraldine sat for a moment silent, with clasped hands. At last there was a prospect of Laurence's complete exoneration from the terrible charge upon which he had been condemned.

She turned to him with a deep-drawn breath.

"Come upstairs to my father now. I have told him you are here. He waits to see you."

Laurence hesitated and flushed.

"He believed me guilty," he said in a tone that conveyed passionate reproach.

"He was misled," explained Geraldine. "He will learn better now, when he sees you."

Laurence yielded, and followed her up the broad shallow stairs.

Mr. Lucas raised himself upon his pillow as they entered. Weak though he was, his look into Laurence's eyes was severe in its questioning.

"I am glad to see you, Laurence," he said feebly. "Your return has been a great surprise to me. I thought you had passed out of our life for ever."

"I am afraid you hoped so, sir," said Laurence bitterly.

Mr. Lucas looked at him for a moment before replying.

"A few days since I thought I was going where I should learn the truth as to your innocence or guilt."

"Sir! Cannot you believe me?" cried Laurence, his features contracting with pain. "Yesterday—even last night—I could only have met your doubt with my bare word. But to-day I have other proof. In a very little while, I trust, my innocence will be publicly established."

Still Mr. Lucas scrutinised him keenly.

"Is there any man whom you believe to be guilty?" he asked.

"There is, sir," Laurence replied.

"Who is it?"

A thrill seemed to pass through the air of the room. Laurence hesitated, doubting whether he had the right thus boldly to accuse any man of the most terrible of crimes. At last he said in a low voice, but firmly:

"Ralph Vickers. I know that he has bitterly wronged me, borne false witness against me, and cruelly persecuted me; and I—together with others—have reason to believe that it was he who murdered Charles Kesteven."

Mr. Lucas drew a deep breath. Geraldine hastily interposed:

"Come away, Laurence. He is not strong enough to hear or to speak more."

The old man, who had sunk back again upon his pillow, nodded.

"Let him come to me to-morrow," he murmured.

"To-morrow morning," said Laurence.

"Not in the morning," protested Geraldine. "It is not safe for you."

Laurence smiled in answer.

"There is no real risk, Geraldine. I will come by the lonely ways."

CHAPTER XLVI

FACE TO FACE

RALPH VICKERS was hurrying to Fenton Court. He wanted to find time for a visit to Mr. Lucas—and possibly also an interview with Geraldine—before starting for the office. Fresh, sparkling-eyed, and dressed as usual with extreme care, he hastened along, with a half smile playing about his lips—the outward expression of an inward satisfaction. His movements had lost every trace of the subtle cautiousness that had once marked them. With restored tranquillity of mind, his bearing had become bold and arrogant. Every shadow of fear had left him. He laughed now at his old dread of retribution. He had come to regard himself as a favourite of fortune, whose every move in the game of life would be attended with success.

He was approaching the boundary walls of the Fenton Court grounds, revelling in his own expectancy, drawing a mental picture of Geraldine Lucas as he would presently see her, with the glow of the morning crowning her rare young beauty, and the traces of sleep still lingering about her lovely eyes. Suddenly he stopped, as if at a word of command. His limbs shook, and a cold shuddering passed quivering through his body. His eyes, void now of all lustre, and with horror staring from them in lieu of triumphant expectation, were fixed upon a man who had turned the corner of the road, and was advancing towards him with quick, firm steps. Who was he—what was he? An apparition?

For a moment Ralph Vickers thought this possible, even in the broad daylight. A cold perspiration broke out upon him. Was it the dead come back to oppose him, to avenge?

He recoiled step by step before the figure that nevertheless drew swiftly nearer, like an oncoming Destiny. It was near enough now for him to realise the truth—that no phantom confronted him, but the living Laurence Gray, changed, aged, scathed by the fiery ordeal through which he had passed, but still the same, the

victim, the man who was supposed to have been silenced for ever.

For an instant the impulse seized Vickers to turn like a coward and fly. But it was too late. He could not move. The other man's eye held him. A stronger will than his own kept him rooted to the spot where he stood. A few seconds more and Laurence Gray had reached him, and they stood facing each other, close together in the searching morning sunlight—the one ashen pale, shrinking, yet still cherishing the poison of defiant hate in the dark currents of his chilling blood; the other noble, strong, serene even in his righteous anger, and terrible in that moment with the tragic dignity that is gained through passionate conflict, suffering, and pain.

"I did not mean to see you yet," said the full rich voice of Laurence Gray; "but it is as well that we have met. I have to speak with you."

"You startled me," Vickers's affectedly light voice came from between his white lips ghastly as laughter from a skeleton's jaws. "But I rejoice to see you—"

"Silence!" Laurence Gray lifted his hand in command. "No more lies to me. I know you for what you are. I have a greater account against you than man ever had against man before."

He laid his hand on Vickers's shoulder. Vickers tried to shake himself free. Now that he had fully realised that it was no phantom armed with vengeance, but an ordinary human being with whom he had to deal, his ebbing courage revived. Fortune had played him an ill turn in thus, as it were, raising up and sending forth this man whom he had believed to be dead. He cursed Warder Gannaway in his heart; but since it had happened so, he must face the situation boldly. Once this crucial moment was passed he might be safe again. It was a desperate hope, but it was worth trying.

"Let me go!" he said sharply. "I think your time in prison must have turned your brain."

"It would have been better for you if it had been so," Laurence rejoined, still retaining the hold, quiet and firm, under which Vickers writhed. "You did all in

your power to bring about such a result. Treacherous coward! You thought I was dead. Your own brain is reeling at the sight of me. What had I done to you that you should hate me so, torture me so? I had been your friend for years; I had loved you and defended you. Why was I chosen to be the scape-goat of your crimes?"

At the last word Vickers's pallor increased to lividness. He gave a short, quick gasp.

"You are mad!" he muttered, in a subdued voice. "I had nothing to do with you. I have better use for my time than to meddle with convicts."

"I have proof," Laurence replied, "but I scarcely needed it. I had suspected you long ago—in the very midst of the sufferings you had instigated—instigated and paid for with the money that had been dedicated by love to my relief."

"He has seen her!" Vickers said to himself with a curse. His hope shrivelled within him. Laurence went on steadily:

"In the solitude of the punishment cell I looked back over the past. I saw things in their true light, and I guessed the part you had played. I was fierce then with cold and hunger and solitary confinement. I thought that if I ever got free I would go to you and spring at your throat, and so deal with you that there should be no more power for evil left in your false body. But now that I am here I am calm, as you see. I leave my vengeance to God. Justice is all I shall seek. But that I will have, justice for myself, justice for the dead, punishment for the shedder of blood."

A convulsion passed over Vickers's face. Laurence noted it, and his fixed gaze made the guilty man shrink until his lithe form seemed to diminish in stature beside the noble figure of his accuser.

"For the shedder of blood," repeated Laurence, in a tone of terrible clearness. "Ralph Vickers, I know you to be a false friend, a perjurer, and an embezzler. And I believe you to be also a murderer."

Vickers was choking with rage and terror. With a supreme effort he wrenched himself away.

"Am I to be the victim of a madman's delusions?" he cried in a voice shrill with fear. His right hand was fumbling in his pocket. Suddenly wheeling round, he blew a policeman's whistle.

In an instant, as it seemed, a crowd gathered about them, with two constables in its midst. Laurence Gray was conscious only of a pressing mass of human beings, of an uproar, in which the voice of Vickers rose above the rest, calling out disjointedly, "Take him—that man there. He's an escaped convict. He's Laurence Gray, who was sentenced to penal servitude for life, for the murder of Charles Kesteven two years ago." And then he felt himself seized by the arm and dragged away.

Flight had been impossible. Resistance would be useless and degrading. He might have said, "This man who accuses me is Charles Kesteven's murderer, not I." But no one would believe a convict's word. And the policemen knew him. Their eyes flashed recognition. One of them was the officer who had arrested him almost on the same spot on the night when his life's tragedy had begun.

In a moment the handcuffs were upon him. He was again a prisoner.

CHAPTER XLVII

REMANDED

On the evening of that day of his recapture, Laurence Gray found himself again at Jedwood Prison. His dream of liberty was over. He was plunged once more into the abyss of captivity and shame.

His condition now was even worse than it had been before his escape. Already his hair was cropped, and his beard and moustache were shaved off. The cell that he occupied was a punishment cell, ominous of what he would later on be called upon to endure, and he was once more dressed in the unsightly garb of a convict.

He knew that severe punishment awaited him. He

would not now escape the lash as he had done at Grimley, for his physical condition no longer afforded a plea for exemption or even delay. But he braced up his courage to confront the threatened indignity. He would struggle against it to the utmost. In spite of the misfortune of his re-arrest, he was not utterly unhappy.. In those few hours of liberty he had done much. He had seen Geraldine. and cleared away for ever whatever doubts of him had been implanted in her mind. She had been saved in the very hour when harassed, desolate, fearing even that he was dead: she had stood on the brink of a despair as great as his own had been before the prospect of freedom had come to save him from madness. Their love had been strengthened, their faith renewed. Henceforth, whatever happened, the evil influence of Ralph Vickers would have no power to blind her.

That short interval of association with the life of the free world had also enabled him to set in vigorous motion investigations which must terminate in the speedy establishing of his complete innocence.

He was, however, in great doubt as to what Vickers would now do. He bitterly regretted the unexpected meeting with him, and, above all, the accusation which he had uttered in the heat of blood. He feared lest Vickers should take the alarm and seek to escape danger by means of flight. Probably his action would depend upon the extent of what he might suppose Laurence to have done and said during his interval of liberty. If he believed that those menaces of an avenging justice were mere empty words, or at most intentions, which Gray's re-arrest had completely nipped in the bud; above all, if he believed that Geraldine and her lover had not met; then he might be bold enough to carry on his schemes with partially renewed confidence. Mr. Lucas, although now convinced of Vickers's unworthiness, was at present debarred from taking any action against him. The old merchant was, indeed, placed in a very awkward position for not only was Vickers now junior partner in the firm, but he had, during his senior's long illness, been entrusted with the entire control of

the business. Vickers, therefore, with everything quiet around him, might relapse into his former state of imagined security, and thus, smiling to himself at his victim's defeat, remain within reach of the law.

On the morning of Gray's recapture, his appearance had caused considerable astonishment to the Hampstead police authorities. They identified him beyond a doubt as Laurence Gray. Yet it was almost incredible that so important a criminal could have escaped from a penal settlement without proclamation of the fact being made to the police throughout the country. Upon searching him, however, a full explanation of his being thus actually at large was found in the ticket-of-leave bearing the name of another convict. A succession of telegrams between Hampstead, Marlborough Street, and Jedwood soon made it impossible for Laurence to evade his fate.

The officer at Jedwood, into whose hand Laurence was given, chanced to be his old friend Warder Hewitt.

Although amazed at the early return of the man who had been so confident of clearing himself, the warder did not speak until he was alone with Laurence in his cell.

"So you didn't manage it after all, lad?" he remarked then. "I am not sorry to see you back again. T'other chap'll be sorry, too. He's a good sort is Lacy; but happen he'll get put in chokey for helpin' you. As for yourself, lad, I wouldn't like to be i' your shoes when the director comes down from London."

"I will bear the punishment bravely," said Laurence. "Don't suppose, sir, that my return here makes me any the less indebted to you for not reporting me when you discovered who I was. I've done what I wanted to do—gained myself peace of heart, and paved my way to freedom. It will not be long now before the law sets me free; and now, can you see Lacy by any means and give him a message from me?"

"Well, lad, it's risky, if I'm seen jawing with a prisoner; but happen I might drop a few words into his ear. You saved my kid's life, and it beant for me to forget *that*."

"Well, if you could see Lacy tell him that I have made inquiries about his mother, and that I found she died two years ago. Tell him, too, that when he gets his discharge, no matter when it be, he must go straight to Miss Lucas. I'll write her address on my slate to-night and you can copy it. Tell him that she will do him a good turn if he goes to her."

"All right."

Laurence did not sleep much that night. But it was no thought of his present position that kept him awake. The sweet memory of Geraldine Lucas, and his firm hope in the result of the investigations to be made by the solicitor, dwarfed all sensations of bitterness and defeat. The one trouble that disturbed his mind was the thought of Geraldine's anxiety concerning him. There was no one to tell her why he had not returned to her. But surely she would guess—even if the newspapers did not inform her—and, knowing what she knew, she would wait in hope. Meanwhile, her image would be with him always, lovely as she herself was, divinely tender and sweet, strengthening him to endure. Once or twice, indeed, he shuddered at the reflection that he might possibly have to remain many months longer in prison, and that he would now be treated with rigorous severity; but he looked upon his punishment as a small enough price to pay for the new joy that had been awakened in his heart.

On the following day at noon he was called before the governor. Entering Major Walsh's room, and taking his place beind the iron bars of the dock, he found that he was not alone. In the next cage to the one in which he stood was Jacques de Lacy.

De Lacy had been summoned without knowing for what reason, and it was not until this moment that he had any idea that Laurence Gray had been recaptured, and their scheme discovered. Instantly he conjectured that the recent visit of Miss Lucas had brought about the disclosure of their plans. He imagined the failure to be more complete than it really was, but presently a bright glance from Gray's eyes partly reassured him.

The governor briefly stated the case of conspiracy

against the two convicts, from which De Lacy gathered that Gray had been free in London for two whole days. It was evident from the first that the strongest indictment was against Gray. De Lacy was regarded as his tool, and was simply charged with being an accessory before the fact. He could only be punished for having broken the prison bye-laws. Furthermore, the extreme term of his sentence would naturally expire within four weeks. The governor could deprive him of his remission, but was powerless to make the punishment extend beyond the term of Lacy's five years. Accordingly, he was merely sentenced to three weeks' solitary confinement on half rations, and on the understanding that in the meantime his hair was to be allowed to grow, and that he was to be duly discharged from penal servitude in a month's time.

Laurence Gray, on being for a second time accused of the heinous offence of breaking prison, promptly pleaded guilty. He was remanded until the next visit of the director, and ordered to be put in chains, to wear the drab and yellow dress, and to remain in his punishment cell in No. 1 prison.

It fortunately happened that at the time of his return to Jedwood the monthly visit of the director had taken place only a few days earlier. For three weeks, therefore, he would be spared the indignity of the lash.

But he did not know this, and every day, every hour of those three weeks was lengthened by the strain of a horrible suspense.

There in that punishment cell, in solitary confinement, and on diet of bread and water, the world of light and freedom and love seemed very far away again. It was terrible to rise thus every morning dreading what the day might bring, to start at every sound in shuddering anticipation of the summons to torture. But now he had hope—strong, firmly founded hope that might at any moment become reality and save him. The monotony of those days was relieved only by the regular visits of the governor, or an occasional interview with the prison chaplain.

During this time he saw nothing of De Lacy. The man in the cell next to his own was the man "Johnnie," whose punishment—including a severe flogging—for attempted escape had made an appalling alteration in his physique. His face had become utterly brutalised. In spite of his good birth and education, he was now scarcely distinguishable from the very worst of his associates.

CHAPTER XLVIII

BEFORE THE DIRECTOR

ONE morning, three weeks and two days after his recapture, Laurence Gray was seated in his cell, hungry and cold, when the distant rattle of a warder's keys struck on his ears. As usual, the sound sent a thrill through his body. Alarm sprang into his eyes. He waited, with nerves strung painfully, for the warder's footsteps to pass away down the corridor.

But they did not pass; they stopped at his door. It opened. Laurence rose from his stool and silently saluted the officer.

"You're to come to the governor's room," the warder gruffly announced. "The director has come."

Laurence drew a deep breath. So his long-dreaded hour had arrived at last. He moved uncertainly for a moment, then threw back his head and steadily walked out of his cell, his fetters rattling as he went. With equal steadiness and dignity he crossed the threshold of the governor's official room.

He started at sight of the man who sat in the principal chair at the governor's table, reading over the charge-sheet. He recognised in him the same director who had ordered him his punishment at Grimley. It appeared also that the director recognised Laurence, or at least that he knew his name, for he raised his eyes inquiringly, and frowned as he continued to read.

"It is the second time he has made an attempt to escape," the governor remarked.

The director nodded. "He is evidently a determined

character, and must be severely dealt with," he said. "Have you the written evidence of Captain Podmore?"

"Here are the letters I have received from him on the matter. It appears that the prisoner was wearing his own clothes and badge when he left Grimley four months ago."

"When was this change of identity made, then?"

"It must have taken place immediately after the Grimley gang arrived here—probably in the bathing-house."

The director looked grave.

"It seems to me there must have been some collusion on the part of the warders," he said. "The men cannot have been properly watched."

"Both men were total strangers to our warders," returned the governor; "there lay their opportunity."

"But was there no proper examination—no comparison of the men with their written descriptions?"

"To the best of my remembrance the examination was as strict as is usual," replied the governor. "But the men are very similar in appearance. The marks on the body agreed also; but for that some contrivance must have been used."

"Can I see the other man—James Lacy?" inquired the director.

"He has been sent to London to be discharged," the governor said, with evident regret. "His sentence expires to-morrow."

Laurence's heart throbbed fast. So, on the following day, De Lacy would be free.

"There must be a thorough inquiry into the whole matter," the director was saying meanwhile to the governor; "you must make it impossible for such a thing to occur again."

Laurence was then asked what he had to say for himself. He attempted no defence, but replied simply:

"I am guilty of the charge. I had meditated escape ever since I was first imprisoned. My imprisonment was unjust. I am an innocent man, and I wanted to get free in order that my innocence might be clearly proved. I beg you for this reason to judge me leniently.

But whatever punishment you appoint me I will bear it with resignation."

His attitude, his face, his earnest, serious voice impressed all present in his favour. But the written record against him was damning, and by this must his penalties be measured.

The director again consulted the report before him.

"I see that at Grimley the doctor interceded on your behalf when you were sentenced to be flogged. You are aware, I suppose, that his intercession was solely on account of your ill-health? If the doctor in this prison pronounces you to be now in sound health you will have to receive the double punishment, three dozen lashes for your first offence, and three dozen for the second. That is the utmost to which I can sentence you. But as you are a life convict you need not hope that it will be diminished. You will receive your flogging in three separate instalments, at intervals of six months."

The marble-like pallor of Laurence's face changed to the deep, dull red of anticipated shame; but otherwise he showed no sign of agitation. Silently he turned away from the bars before which he had stood, and followed the warder out of the room. When he had gone the chief warder handed a letter to the governor. Major Walsh perused it, then passed it to the director.

"It is a letter from the Home Office," he said. "Oddly enough, it concerns, the very man who was before us a moment ago—Laurence Gray."

"Indeed?"

"It seems he is wanted in London," pursued the governor, with a perplexed air. "I am instructed to send him at once to Newgate."

CHAPTER XLIX

NOT AT HOME

AFTER the arrest of Laurence Gray, Vickers, left alone by the crowd that excitedly followed the prisoner, leaned back against the railings in a state of dazed exhaustion. On first encountering Laurence, the

necessity for immediate action and dissimulation had spurred him to overcome his consternation and horror; but now that the crisis was past, a reaction of feeling set in, overwhelming him with bitterness and fear. The bitterness swelled into malignant rage against Gannaway for having deceived him, and against fate for having risen thus to beat him down at the very moment when he approached the crown and summit of his success. Recovering his self-control after a few minutes, he turned back and walked down the road, looking out for a hansom. He could not now go on to Fenton Court. His nerves were too unsteady. He shrank even from the gaze of the rare passers-by, imagining that his bloodless face must bear the record of his thoughts. Fear gripped him by the heartstrings. He felt himself to be entangled in a web whose meshes were the more terrible in that he did not know where they began or where they ended. He had believed himself to be secure, triumphant, and lo! in an instant he was grovelling again in abject terror.

"A resurrection! a resurrection! a resurrection!" the words clanged in his soul as he walked on.

It might be that all was not yet lost—that with the aid of audacity and diplomacy he could still clear a way out of the fearful labyrinth in which circumstances had involved him. But to do so he must know exactly what had happened—how long Laurence Gray had been out of prison; whom he had seen; what action, if any, he had taken with regard to the proving of his own innocence; and lastly, whether it had been Warder Gannaway or Geraldine who had informed him of the bribery. Also, did Laurence know to what extent, and with what motive, the bribery had been carried on?

It was necessary that Vickers should become certain upon all these points before he could venture to make a move in self-defence. On the most important point—that of the length of time that Laurence had been free—he might have got information if he had been bold enough to accompany the prisoner to the police-station. But this he had not dared to do. Owing to the instant recognition of Laurence by one of the constables, there

had been no necessity for him personally to give information about the convict, and his own desire to follow him to the station had been counteracted by fear—the vague fear of a second stroke of fate.

But for lack of this knowledge he could not as yet judge his own position.

As he hurried on, casting nervous glances about him —for this morning's experiences had made him mistrustful even of the empty daylight—the chance hansom that he had hoped for came along. He jumped into it, and was driven direct to the office. There, as he passed through to his private room, he scanned the faces of the clerks. Had they heard anything? Had their demeanour towards him altered?

Neither their looks nor their manners had changed in the slightest degree; but his guilty conscience imagined a difference and he closed his teeth hard and quickened his steps.

Secure within his room he tried to face the situation calmly, to reason out a plan of action. But he could do neither. His brain was paralysed by the violent shock of discovering that the man whom he had believed to be dead was alive and armed against him. How was it so? Had Gannaway deliberately cheated him, or was it—and at this thought his fear increased—was it that the justice of Heaven fought with Laurence Gray to thwart him?

The fact that Laurence was now thrust back into prison did little to allay Vickers's agitation. It was too late. Judging by Laurence's hair and beard he must have been free for several weeks. And yet would he have been free so long without seeing Geraldine? Vickers could have sworn that three days ago she had known nothing of her lover's escape. Had she known of it his own announcement of Laurence's death would have had no power to hurt her.

The more he pondered, the more appalling grew the mystery. There was no doubt that Geraldine knew now of Laurence's return, for Laurence had spoken of certain things—such as "the money dedicated by love" to his relief—that he could only have learned

from Geraldine's own lips. The revengeful hatred in Vickers's heart grew darker and bitterer with jealousy. Whatever happened, Geraldine was lost to him. Even if the blood-guilt on his soul remained undiscovered, she would never permit him to approach her again.

The thought maddened him. For the first time since the terrible meeting of that morning a wave of colour flushed his face, and a hot light crept into his dulled eyes.

He resolved to make an attempt to see her, if only to glean from her words of indignation some enlightenment as to what was known against him. Acting on this impulse, he went that afternoon to Fenton Court. He had resumed as far as possible his ordinary outward manner, but a secret dread clutched at his heart. Something whispered to him that his time of triumph was passed, that the bold fabric of his deceit was for ever overthrown.

As he walked up the gravelled drive at Fenton Court he saw Geraldine at one of the lower windows of the house. Upon seeing him she left the window, and a moment later his ring at the bell was answered by Pearse, the footman, with the intimation that Miss Lucas was "not at home."

Vickers grew pale. But still he maintained his outward calm.

"Then I will go up and see Mr. Lucas," he said.

He made a step forward. But Pearse barred the way.

"Excuse me, sir; I have orders not to admit you."

Trembling inwardly with rage, Vickers turned away. But stronger even than his mortification was the growing fear which oppressed him. In spite of his positive knowledge that Laurence Gray was now again under restraint, he felt a presentiment of danger—personal, immediate danger. The very air seemed to him to be charged with warnings.

He could not rest that night. His blood was at fever-heat, his brain a chaos of conflicting thoughts. Alone in his room, in the darkness, he tried to make out a plan of action. But his natural cunning failed him, defeated by the tumult of rage, and powerless hate and

baffled passion that possessed his soul. At last, when the grey dawn came to chill him with the grim menace of another day, he resolved upon a desperate course. The resolution seemed to calm him. His nerves grew more steady, and his eyes, as they met the growing light, had in them the gleam of a fixed purpose.

At ten o'clock that morning he arrived at the office and went at once to his private room. Here he did not, as usual, seat himself at his writing table, but, unlocking the safe, he took out a blank cheque that already bore the signature of Mr. Lucas. This cheque he filled in and countersigned. Then, gathering together a few of his personal possessions, he quitted the office.

CHAPTER L

FLIGHT !

On passing out from the office buildings, Ralph Vickers had taken no particular notice of a hansom cab that was waiting opposite the door. The cab was without an occupant, but the driver did not appear to be anxious to get a fare. It is even probable that had any one hailed him he would have declared himself engaged. He had been there about half an hour. The heavy rain fell upon his shiny overalls, and dripped from the rim of his hat; but of this he appeared to be unconscious. He was absorbed in watching the door of the building in which the office of Christopher Lucas & Co. was situated, and looking with singular interest into the face of everyone who entered or came out. When at last Ralph Vickers came down the long, wide staircase, and paused for a moment at the outer door to open his umbrella, the cabman made a slight forward movement, and his gaze sharpened into a yet keener scrutiny. He turned his head, and with strained intentness watched the little figure of Vickers walking away down the wet pavement. Then he took up his reins, and drove off briskly in the opposite direction.

About a couple of hours afterwards the same hansom and driver returned, and a tall, stout, red-faced man got

out of the vehicle and entered the building. As he went up the stairs he drew an official-looking document from his inner pocket, glanced at it a moment, as though to make sure that it was all right, and then went in at the door of Lucas & Co.'s office.

"Is Mr. Vickers in?" he asked of the office-boy.

"No, sir. We're expectin' of him every minit, though," replied James Stinchcombe. James contemplated the stranger curiously, and came to the conclusion that he looked very much like a policeman in plain clothes.

"How long has he been out?" pursued the suspicious-looking stranger.

"About two hours. Wot name, please?"

"No name at all. Did he say where he was going to?"

"No; I think as 'e were goin' to the bank. Do you want to seo 'im pertickler? Will you wait?"

"No; I'll call again. What bank was it?"

The boy mentioned a bank in Lombard Street.

Returning to the cab, the detective—for such the stranger was—called up to the driver:

"He's slipped off. Are you sure he didn't recognise you?"

"Sartin! 'Tain't likely as 'e'd know a cove like me arter two years. I ain't such a uncommon 'andsome chap as 'im. But *I* knoo *'im* again, yer may lay to that. Where to next?"

"Drop me at the corner of Lombard Street."

A few minutes' conversation with one of the tellers in the bank elicited the information that Mr. Ralph Vickers had been at the counter nearly two hours before, and that he had withdrawn from the bank on Mr. Lucas's credit the sum of £3,000.

"Can you oblige me with the numbers of the bank-notes?" asked the detective. "I am from Scotland Yard, and I have reason to believe that this man intends to abscond. I have a warrant for his apprehension."

On receiving a list of the numbers, the detective went out hurriedly, and drove to Vickers's lodgings. Vickers was not there. At his club, and again at Mr. Lucas's office, inquiries were made; but it was evident that the

gentleman inquired for had taken timely warning, and had flown.

Vickers's flight lent weight to the belief that he was guilty of the terrible charge preferred against him, and before the day had run its course the police had despatched messages all over the country, giving a description of the fugitive, together with the numbers of the bank-notes in his possession.

For three days nothing was heard concerning him. But on the fourth day a message was received from Stranraer intimating that a man answering to the description of Vickers had crossed over to Belfast. This was followed by a second telegram stating that two ten-pound notes bearing numbers corresponding with those communicated by the London police had been passed into a Belfast bank.

Ralph Vickers was in Ireland. On the first day of his flight he had taken the express from Euston to Stranraer. Pausing there for a couple of days, and assuring himself that he was not tracked, he crossed over to Belfast, and at once continued his journey south to Queenstown. He had avoided the more direct route by Holyhead, as he had avoided Liverpool, knowing very well that if it was once suspected that he intended to cross the Atlantic, the police would naturally watch for him at the stations on the direct line.

He arrived at Queenstown, as he had intended to do, within two hours of the time when the *Teutonic* was advertised to sail for New York.

As he entered the steamship offices to take out his passage, a tall, red-faced gentleman of official aspect hurried in before him. They reached the booking-counter at the same moment. At the same moment each asked for a berth in the first-class cabin.

"There is only one berth vacant," said the booking-clerk. "Which of you is first?"

"I am first," cried Vickers authoritatively.

"I beg your pardon, sir, I entered the office in advance of you," protested the other hotly. "I am first, and I mean to have the preference; I am not going second cabin if I can help it."

"There are no second berths left," put in the clerk; "this is the only vacant place in the whole steamer."

Vickers burned with angry impatience. For him everything might depend on the securing of this chance.

"Well, I'll toss up with you who shall have it," he said sharply. "I have an appointment in New York in seven days' time, and I wouldn't miss it for anything—come, head or tail?" and he threw up a sovereign.

But the strange gentleman objected.

"No," he said, "I'll tell you what I'll do. You have a bank-note in your hand. I have one in mine. Now, let us compare our numbers, and the man whose note bears the highest figures shall have the berth. That's fair, isn't it?"

"Quite fair," Vickers agreed. And he spread out his note upon the mahogany. His opponent did the same.

"Confound it!" exclaimed the latter. "You have it! But that's curious, eh? Look! There's only one figure different!"

Vickers drew back astonished. He recognised the other's note as being one of those that he had recently changed in Belfast. Overcoming his discomfiture, he turned to the clerk and booked the vacant berth. He gave an assumed name, and received his coupon. When he looked round the strange gentleman was gone.

In another hour Vickers was on board the great steamer. The second bell had rung. The mail bags were on board, and the tender was preparing to leave. In another few minutes the engines would be set in motion, not to stop again until the *Teutonic* should be off Sandy Hook.

CHAPTER LI

AT THE THIRD BELL

RALPH VICKERS stood on the promenade deck of the *Teutonic*, carelessly watching the ever-moving, gesticulating, eager crowd that thronged the stately vessel.

His eyes expressed complacent amusement and a smile of satisfaction hovered about his lips. The fear and the dark passions that had lately distorted his features had now passed away, leaving his face serene as in the days of his complete success. He was a different man from the Ralph Vickers of an hour before. He believed himself once more safe.

Yes, quite safe now; and for ever. He congratulated himself on his foresight and cleverness in escaping before the actual bursting of the storm. He did not know how near it had been to bursting—did not suspect that a delay of another two hours would have made his flight impossible. Consequently, he did not think that anyone would as yet be on his track. Moreover, he was convinced that even if he were already "wanted," he had succeeded in baffling pursuit. His roundabout route to Queenstown and the booking of his passage in a false name only two hours before the starting of the steamer—surely these were enough to assure his having left no trace behind? Probably, in a few days' time, the police would be watching for him at Liverpool, while he, secure and free, would be drawing near the shores of the New World. He smiled to himself at the thought.

Once landed in America, he would speed away to the West—Texas or California—and try his fortune there. The prospect pleased him. After all, he had no reason to regret the enforced change. He was tired of being so long in the same place, chained to business—tired of living an outwardly reputable life and scheming for a reward that never came nearer. He was going to a place where he could live as he liked and show his real character freely without fear of public condemnation.

Suddenly, while these thoughts were in his mind, a girl passing by him reminded him of Geraldine Lucas. Not that there was any real resemblance—he had never in his life seen a face that could compare with Geraldine's—but a similarity in the carriage of the head called up the momentarily-forgotten image of the woman he had so balefully loved. A cloud of mortification darkened his brow. After having risked so much to win her,

it was galling to be obliged to acknowledge himself beaten.

"But *he* will not have her," he said to himself, taking comfort in the belief that Laurence Gray was now safely incarcerated for his whole lifetime. "They can never prove him innocent without proving me guilty. So if she marries anybody it will be a stranger."

As for himself, he would find a new love across the seas. And it was possible that with luck and hard work he might make for himself in a few years a fortune as large as that which he had hoped to win with Geraldine.

The shadow cleared away from his brow He interrupted his reflections to go below and fetch something that he needed from his portmanteau. He looked at his watch as he entered the state room. In a few minutes more the great steamer would start.

He had scarcely opened the portmanteau when a knock came at the state-room door. A steward entered.

"There's a gentleman wants to see you, sir, before the tender goes off," he announced

Vickers looked up, startled.

"To see *me!*" he exclaimed. In that instant his countenance had changed. He scented danger. Who could it be that had asked for him by the name in which he had taken his passage?

"This way," said the steward. And at the same moment he ushered in the tall, red-faced man who had disputed with Vickers in the steamship office.

"Pardon my intrusion," began the stranger smoothly "but I believe your name—your real name—is Vickers, Ralph Vickers?"

Vickers made no reply; but the fear and anger struggling on his face would in themselves have been sufficient to betray him.

"You need not deny it," the visitor proceeded; "I have proof. Permit me to read this document to you. We have just enough time before the tender starts back for shore."

"What do you mean?" inquired Vickers haughtily. "Who are you?"

"I am an officer from Scotland Yard, Mr Vickers.

And I am here to apprehend you—there's the warrant—to apprehend you on the charge of wilfully murdering Charles Kesteven. Come, the game's up. You'd better come quietly. Excuse me, I'll put the handcuffs on you, if you please."

With an oath Vickers attempted to resist; but the detective was stronger and more adroit than he. In a moment the handcuffs were clasped upon him, and a second officer had appeared to assist in getting him up the cabin stairs.

As he was being hurried across the deck to the gangway the third bell rang. In surprise the passengers made way for the police officers and their prisoner. Vickers, inwardly writhing, saw bent upon him the severe, astonished looks of some girls who had before surveyed him with approving half-smiles. Blinded with rage and humiliation, he was conscious of nothing more until the tender landed him upon the quay. Then, with a shock, he realised his own position. He was there under arrest, manacled and disgraced, and the *Teutonic* was steaming outwards towards the open sea.

CHAPTER LII

AN UNLOOKED-FOR PROCEEDING

LAURENCE GRAY returned to his cell prepared for the worst. He saw no possibility now of escaping the lash, and he nerved himself to meet it with fortitude.

Pale, but calm and resolute, he sat awaiting the dreaded summons. He no longer shuddered at the sound of footsteps in the corridor. Since this horrible degradation must inevitably be inflicted on him, the sooner it was over the better. It was not the physical pain he feared, but the disgrace. Gladly would he have bought exemption from the disgrace at the cost of suffering a hundred times as keen.

But although by sheer force of will he had made himself strong to endure, yet his heart was like lead within him. This flogging would mean more to him

than the mere laceration of his skin, more even than its own bitter ignominy; it would mean the shattering for ever of all his life's best hopes. It would mean forfeiture of Geraldine.

He had realised this in the short time that had passed since the director had pronounced sentence upon him. His thoughts had flashed back to the scene he had witnessed long before, in the punishment hall at Grimley —the groaning wretch just released from the triangle to which he had been bound, limp as a beaten dog, and with his back striped and bleeding Could a man who had gone through that, however innocently, dare to think himself worthy even to touch the hand of such a woman as Geraldine?

She would not alter, Laurence knew. She, in her loving sweetness, would be the same to him as heretofore. But would it be manly in him to take advantage of her goodness of heart?

His very love and reverence for her said to him "No." The husband of one so lovely and so noble should be a man who could stand upright before the world with his dignity unsullied; not one who had bared his back to receive a shameful chastisement. She must not give her proud young life to a man who had been whipped like a hound. He would refuse to accept the sacrifice even though his heart should break.

So he thought as throughout the whole day, he sat waiting in almost motionless expectancy. When darkness came he knew that he would have a few hours' respite, and, worn out, he flung himself down on his plank bed to sleep.

He awoke early on the following morning, and set himself to the work of cleaning out his cell. At seven o'clock a warder opened the trap-door and handed in his breakfast. To Laurence's surprise, it was not the usual loaf of bread and can of cold water, but a dish of thick warm gruel. He ate it with eager relish, knowing that the nourishment would be required to give him bodily strength to bear the lash. A couple of hours afterwards his cell door was opened, and a warder entered.

"Now," thought Laurence. And he straightened himself for the expected ordeal.

The warder conducted him to the bath-house, and there brusquely told him to strip. Laurence mechanically obeyed. But when he had taken off his outer garments, the warder stopped him and proceeded to unfasten his fetters. This was an unusual course, for convicts wearing chains generally bathe without having their irons removed.

When Laurence had washed himself he was supplied with clean flannels and a suit of ordinary prison clothes —not the parti-coloured costume of punishment. He dressed himself silently, wondering meanwhile what could be the reason of this unlooked-for proceeding.

His wonder was presently increased when, instead of being marched into the hall where he expected to receive his flogging, he was taken into a long, white-washed passage and there handcuffed. A door was opened and he was pushed into one of the narrow compartments of a prison van. Then the thought flashed across his brain—was it possible that they were going to take him back to Grimley? Was he to be given the opportunity he desired of confronting Gannaway and publicly accusing him of his disgraceful bargaining with Vickers? Laurence himself did not as yet know the full guilt of that compact between his enemy and the inhuman warder.

The van drove off quickly. Laurence was its only occupant. After a ride of about an hour he heard the shrill whistle of a locomotive. Descending from the van he was marched down the platform of a railway station and thrust into an ordinary third-class carriage in charge of a couple of armed warders.

"Where are you taking me to, sir?" he asked of one of them.

"Hold your tongue," was the warder's gruff reply. Laurence saw him examine his loaded revolver previously to taking out a newspaper and settling himself comfortably in a corner.

The carriage door was locked, so that no other passengers entered, and Laurence was unable to con-

jecture his destination with any certainty. The names of the stations passed on the way did not enlighten him. But when at last the train steamed into a great terminus, he realised with a rush of joy that this was London. He started violently in his seat, thereby drawing upon himself a rebuke from one of his guardians.

London! Then he was on the eve of release! The proceedings of his solicitor on his behalf must have resulted in something!

Light of heart he got into the "Black Maria" that awaited him, and was driven through the roar of the London streets.

Shut up in his narrow box in the prison van, he could see nothing; but that perpetual noise of the traffic came clearly to his ears. He could distinguish the familiar omnibus cries, "Bank! Bank! Charing Cross! Strand!" and, common-place though they were, they were cheering to him as the greetings of old friends.

The drive was long, and towards its close he was harassed by a fear that chilled his heart—the fear lest he was not, after all, to remain in London, but was only being taken through the city to another railway station to catch the train for Grimley. Just when this fear was growing to a conviction, the van stopped suddenly. He heard a noise that was like that of the opening of a great gate. Then the door of the van was unlocked. The inner door of the compartment in which he was confined opened in its turn, and he was conducted within the walls of Newgate Prison.

CHAPTER LIII

IN THE CHAPEL AT NEWGATE

When Laurence arrived it was late in the afternoon and already dark. He was taken upstairs to one of the galleries and ushered into a cell resembling the one which he had occupied in the same prison some two years previously. A pint of cocoa was served to him,

together with a loaf of bread. Then his door was locked upon him, and he was left alone.

He ate and drank, for he was both hungry and thirsty. Joy made the simple bread and cocoa seem the sweetest food that he had touched for many a day. His heart swelled with relief and thankfulness. Once more—and also, he trusted, for ever—he had been rescued from the lash. He had been snatched from the bitter shame that, as he had resolved, would have wrecked his life's happiness. God had indeed—as the good chaplain at Grimley had promised—watched over him and been merciful to him in his despair.

There was no need for him to ask himself why it was that he was here in Newgate. It was evident that his solicitor had collected sufficiently convincing evidence to justify him in appealing for a new trial of the Kesteven murder case. This trial that would give him back his honour—his liberty—his love—must surely be very near now.

Weary as he was, he found it inexpressibly sweet to lie down to sleep that night without the dread of waking—the horror of the coming day—that for the last three weeks had made his hours of rest only hours of keener suffering. In this place, the clanging of the morning bell would only bring him hope.

At six o'clock it awoke him. After he had polished the asphalt floor of his cell, cleaned all his utensils, and eaten his breakfast, he was summoned to chapel. His heart was light with new hope, as he trod the well-remembered passages and corridors. He could scarcely believe that two years before he had gone along those halls and galleries with the heavy step of a man condemned to death.

He wondered where they would place him in the chapel. Presently he found himself in one of the two large, cage-like spaces that were divided off from the rest of the room by iron bars. He was in the one destined for convicts who had been tried and sentenced, and were waiting to be drafted off to the various penal establishments.

He looked round the chapel. The seats set apart

for remanded prisoners were very fully occupied, and from this fact he conjectured that it was the time of the sessions in the Central Criminal Court. In the cage opposite to the one in which he sat were the prisoners who had been committed for trial. These men were of course, still wearing their own clothes.

Laurence carelessly glanced over the group of heads. But suddenly his gaze became fixed, and the colour flushed over his cheeks and brow. There was one head that was darker than the rest—the head of a man who sat in an attitude of defiant sullenness. Laurence leant forward with quick-throbbing pulses. The man was some twelve yards away, but at that moment, either by chance or by magnetic attraction, he raised his head and looked round. Laurence saw his face fully. It was the face of his enemy, his oppressor, the one living man against whom his heart cried out to Heaven for vengeance.

"So he is here!" he murmured below his breath. "Here at last! And among those who are committed for trial."

Their eyes met across the distance. There was a gleam of mockery in Ralph Vickers's gaze as he surveyed his rival's shorn head and ignominious clothing. But in that moment, more than ever before, the noble face and manly dignity of Laurence Gray triumphed over the degradation of his convict garb. He saw the taunt in Vickers's eyes, and his own eyes answered back:

"It is because of you that I am here. Even here, in this prison chapel, at this very moment, I am bearing the load of your guilt.

Vickers smiled insolently.

CHAPTER LIV

THE SECOND TRIAL

IMMEDIATELY after chapel that first morning of his stay in Newgate, Laurence Gray was summoned to the glass consulting-room to have an interview with his solicitor. The interview was long, and in the course

of it the solicitor, Mr. Gilmore, informed Laurence that the best counsel would be retained to watch the case on his behalf at Mr. Christopher Lucas's expense. This was at Mr. Lucas's express desire.

Laurence walked back to his cell lightly, as if he trod on air. Its bareness no longer chilled him. He looked around it as a man looks at a place he is soon to leave.

He suffered, indeed, from cold. On this December day the black asphalt floor of his cell was like ice under his feet. Now and again he climbed up to his strongly-barred window, and from it, through a small open space, he saw the snow falling softly on the roofs of the houses, and on the great dome of St. Paul's.

He sprang down again, and settled himself anew at his oakum-picking. His hands were blue with cold. As he worked he wondered in what part of the prison Ralph Vickers was lodged, and whether he, too, felt the cold. Throughout the whole morning his nerves had thrilled with the shock of that meeting with the man of whose bitter treachery he had for two years been the victim. But justice was coming at last—at last.

The summons to go into court came sooner than he expected.

The second trial of the Gospel Oak murder case attracted extraordinary public interest. The rumour that there had been a grave miscarriage of justice, and that, by the verdict of the former trial, an innocent man had narrowly escaped death, and had spent nearly two years in penal servitude, stirred the popular feeling and drew a large number of spectators to the court-house of the Old Bailey. Of these the majority failed to obtain admission, the court having, in a very short time, become crowded to its utmost capacity; this, too, in spite of the weather, which was that day inclement in the extreme.

Many who had been present at the earlier trial looked with keen interest at the man who had now taken the place in the dock that had formerly been occupied by Laurence Gray.

Ralph Vickers's face was deathly pale. His lips

twitched convulsively, and his delicate, long hands played nervously with his watch-chain. But he tried to assume a demeanour of unconcern as he crossed his legs and looked from the judge to the jury, and from the jury to the gentlemen in white wigs and black gowns, who busily turned over their briefs, or stood in whispering groups.

Presently his eyes wandered towards a bench in front of the jury-box, where Geraldine Lucas sat, bending over in earnest conversation with a solicitor. His gaze kindled with thwarted passion as it lingered upon her. Suddenly there came a loud, confused hum of many voices, and the people in the gallery above his head craned over excitedly to look at a man who was being led into court by a prison warder.

"There 'e is! That's 'im! Poor cove! Don't 'e look orful?" said a voice in the gallery.

"Silence in the court!" roared the stentorian voice of the usher.

Laurence Gray, wearing a heavy overcoat above his prison clothes, was conducted to a chair within sight of the jury. His warder sat beside him. Instinctively he looked towards the seat whence, two years before, Geraldine Lucas had watched his trial. He saw her now in the same place, looking fair as ever in her long, fur-bordered cloak, but pale and anxious. Their eyes met, and she started at the paleness of his face, and the strange aspect of his close-cropped head, the only visible sign of his convict condition, since the overcoat concealed his branded clothes. In a moment she turned to the solicitor again. The solicitor advanced towards Laurence, shook hands with him, gave him a few words of hope from Geraldine, and then passed further on to speak with Gray's counsel.

When the preliminary formalities of the court had been gone through, the counsel for the prosecution rose to open the case. He was a barrister whose eminence and great reputation as a criminal lawyer were in themselves a guarantee that the case of Convict 99 would be submitted to a thorough and convincing scrutiny.

On rising, he stated that the case which the jury

were called upon to try was an unusual one, requiring their most grave consideration and careful judgment, but that it was one which, he regretted to say, was not without precedent in the records of criminal procedure. It was the trial of a man who was now accused of a crime of which another man had already been pronounced guilty. It involved a two fold issue. If the evidence which he was about to bring forward should prove the prisoner at the bar to be guilty, then the verdict of the jury must have the effect of establishing the innocence of that other man—a deeply-injured man—who, by the verdict passed at a former trial two years before, had been condemned to death, and who had escaped that extreme punishment only to be consigned to life-long penal servitude Should their conclusions reverse the verdict arrived at in the previous trial, it would not necessarily argue that the judgment passed upon that occasion was contrary to the weight of evidence adduced at that time, but only that that earlier verdict had been based upon incomplete proofs, and supported by a most singular concatenation of accusing circumstances. This was not the place, he continued, in which to advance arguments in favour of establishing a court of criminal appeal. He believed that the present case would in itself offer a more eloquent illustration of the necessity for such a court than any words of his own could possibly do.

The prisoner, Ralph Vickers, stood charged with the wilful murder of Charles Kesteven. The crime took place two years ago, on Wednesday, February 15th. On the discovery of the murder, suspicion fell, not upon the present prisoner, but upon one Laurence Gray, who was arrested, brought to trial, found guilty, and condemned to death. The death penalty had been commuted to penal servitude for life. During his incarceration the convict Gray had made two daring attempts to escape from prison, the second attempt being temporarily successful.

It was on the occasion of his second escape that he had been enabled to bring about these proceedings, and to produce evidence pointing to his own complete inno-

cence and to the probable guilt of the prisoner Vickers.

At the original trial, Vickers had appeared as a witness for the defence. It might be very confidently assumed that it was mainly by Vickers's evidence that the jury had been blinded to the possibility of his own connection with the crime—that evidence amounting in the total to a very skilfully-contrived *alibi*.

Recapitulating the main body of the evidence upon which Laurence Gray had been convicted, counsel stated that he would call several witnesses who had taken no part in the original trial. Those witnesses would supply many important links that had hitherto been missing from the chain of evidence. Continuing, he said:

"The deceased, Charles Kesteven, was a chartered accountant, who was engaged prior to the day of his murder in auditing the commercial accounts of Messrs. Christopher Lucas & Co., by which firm the prisoner Vickers and the convict Gray were both employed. The motive which was alleged against Gray as the supposed murderer of the accountant was that he was aware of some serious defalcations in those accounts. It was believed that he had embezzled several hundred pounds from his employer, and that he sought to prevent discovery by slaying the man by whom that discovery must inevitably have been made. Gentlemen of the jury, I shall prove to you that the prisoner at the bar had precisely the same motive.

"Then, as to the crime itself. It was proved that on the evening of the murder Gray had had a dispute with the deceased on the subject of these embezzlements. It was also proved that Gray and the deceased went to the railway station together and travelled in the same carriage by the 4.27 train. Gray's defence was that he left that carriage at Gospel Oak—that is to say, before the murder was committed. I shall show how and why he changed carriages, and I shall further prove what was never put in question at the former trial—that Vickers travelled in that same train."

This statement produced a sensation in the court. Counsel proceeded.

"It was on the railway embankment, half-way between

the station of Gospel Oak and Hampstead Heath, that the dead body of Charles Kesteven was found stabbed in the breast by a weapon which was identified as the property of Gray. An important witness will prove that for several hours previous to the time of the murder Gray could not possibly have seen that weapon, but that, on the contrary, it was in Vickers's possession within half an hour of the committal of the crime. Another witness will swear to having seen Vickers a few minutes after the time of the murder, agitated, and with stains of blood upon his clothes.

"But having himself successfully eluded the police, Vickers, it would appear, at once proceeded to cover all traces of his own guilt, and fix suspicion upon an innocent man. Gray was his rival in the patronage of their employer; he was also his rival in a more romantic sense, and the hatred with which Vickers regarded him will be sufficiently shown by Vickers's subsequent conduct. When, therefore, by a chain of singular, and, let me add, singularly well-arranged, circumstances, Gray was ultimately convicted of the murder, and condemned to death, Vickers evidently felt himself secure. But when the innocent man was—owing to the force of public opinion—rescued from the executioner's rope and thrust into a convict's cell, his enemy, probably conscious of a lingering danger, pursued him even within the walls of the prison, and, by illegally bribing an unscrupulous warder, sought to drive him into a convict's grave. But a higher Power was watching over the innocent prisoner. Gray, on escaping from Jedwood, came to London. He was at liberty for forty-eight hours, during which time he encountered and accused his enemy Vickers. It was at the close of this scene that Vickers, overcome with fear, procured the re-arrest of the escaped convict. Gray was sent back to prison. But he had achieved his purpose. Vickers found that he could no longer continue his deception and treachery. Having so worked himself into his employer's favour as to be made a partner in the firm, he now repaid Mr. Lucas's kindness by fraudulently withdrawing the sum of £3,000 from the bank and

absconding with the money. He was arrested three weeks ago on an American liner at Queenstown. The evidence of witnesses whom I am about to call will reveal that the prisoner pursued a criminal course such as it is seldom the duty of any prosecuting counsel to present before a jury in this court.

"It might be supposed that there would be difficulty in bringing forward witnesses to swear to minute events and circumstances which occurred so long ago as last February twelve months. But three very important witnesses will be called in addition to those who gave evidence at the original trial. It may be asked why were not these witnesses subpœnaed for the former trial? I can only assume that the convict Gray was so fully assured of his ability to prove his own innocence that he was less active than it was expedient he should have been in producing testimony in his defence. And it will be borne in mind that our judicial system does not permit a prisoner to go into the witness-box. Had Gray been allowed to do so—had he been allowed to give an account of how and why he changed carriages at Gospel Oak Station—above all, had he been allowed to see the account books, and been cross-examined as to the defalcations which were alleged against him as a motive for the murder, he would have been able easily to establish his innocence. His refusal to be sworn—if he had refused—would have removed all doubt of his guilt. But the law will not permit the most important of all witnesses—the accused man himself—to give evidence on oath. What can be more flagrantly unjust and absurd? Were it otherwise, how many an honest and innocent man might have been spared the dishonour, the shame, the torture of spending perhaps the best years of his life in penal servitude!

"Gentlemen of the jury, I call upon you to look at the two men before you, and to compare them in your unbiassed minds. I call upon you to remember your duty, carefully to weigh and study the evidence which will now be called, and to determine finally and conclusively, once and for all, which one of these two men is guilty of the murder of Charles Kesteven."

CHAPTER LV

THE VINDICATION

MR CHRISTOPHER LUCAS was the first witness examined. He looked paler than usual, and weak after his recent illness. His former evidence given at the trial of Laurence Gray was read over to him from the official report.

"Do you still adhere to what you deposed in regard to the character of Laurence Gray?" asked the examining counsel.

"I do," said Mr. Lucas firmly. "I consider him an upright and honourable man. I know nothing against him."

'Then you withdraw your evidence as to the alleged embezzlements?"

"Yes. After a most careful and patient examination of the office books, and particularly of the items concerned in the embezzlements, I believe the defalcations were not caused by Laurence Gray, but that the entries in question were cleverly manipulated by another hand in order to incriminate him I am also further convinced that the alterations of figures were made in Gray's books not before, but *after*, the time of the murder."

At this point the ledgers were produced in court and placed before Mr. Lucas, who was asked to give evidence as to the handwriting.

"The handwriting throughout," he said, "is that of Laurence Gray. But I now recognise that several erasures have been made, and that false entries have been inserted in the place of those erasures. I cannot swear to it, but to the best of my belief those false entries have been made by no other hand than that of Ralph Vickers"

"At what juncture did you alter your opinion concerning these defalcations?"

"Not until three weeks ago, when I saw Laurence Gray, and when the disappearance of Vickers and his theft of £3,000 opened my eyes to his duplicity and to

Gray's innocence. I then had these ledgers brought to my house, and I examined the false entries under the microscope with the assistance of an expert in handwriting."

"How long had the prisoner been in your employment before you admitted him to partnership?"

"About seven years."

"His admission to partnership in your business was, I believe, with a view to his marriage with your daughter?"

"I am sorry to say that such was at one time my intention."

"He had planned, therefore, to supersede Gray, not only in your business, but also in your home?"

"That is so," acknowledged Lucas.

"I must ask you one more question Mr. Lucas. Were you aware when you first engaged Vickers that he had formerly served a term of imprisonment for forgery?"

"Good gracious, no!" cried the old merchant, turning his astonished eyes quickly in the direction of the prisoner. Vickers only smiled. Laurence Gray caught his breath in his surprise at the revelation. His solicitor whispered to him that this bad fact in Vickers's past life had been ascertained through information supplied by Jacques de Lacy.

The recorded evidence of Angus Macintyre was then read and attested. It proved that on the evening of the murder Laurence Gray travelled in the same carriage with the witness and Charles Kesteven as far as Gospel Oak Station. Macintyre, re-examined, asserted, with Scotch persistence, that he could not swear that Gray did not remain in the carriage when he himself alighted at Gospel Oak.

William Lethbridge was then called.

"I am a banker's clerk," he said, "and I live at Hampstead. I have known Laurence Gray for several years, and am proud to call him my friend. On the morning of the day in question I met Gray in the city. He told me that he was going home early that day—by the 4.27 train. I said I would go with him by the same train, so that our conversation, which was a scientific

one, might be continued. But I received a telegram during the morning summoning me to Hampshire. I was not subpœnaed at the former trial, nor did I believe that my evidence could have been of value. But I do not doubt that when Gray left the railway carriage at Gospel Oak it was in order to look for me in another compartment of the train."

Counsel then stated that this evidence tallied exactly with what Gray had said on the night of his arrest before the inspector who took the charge against him. It was obvious that if Gray had had time to change carriages another man might have had time to take his place in the compartment wherein Charles Kesteven had been left the sole occupant.

Here counsel turned his eyes towards the dock. Vickers cringed before his look.

CHAPTER LVI

PROOF ADDED TO PROOF

William Pearse, footman in the employ of Mr. Lucas, then swore to Vickers's arrival at Fenton Court on the occasion of the ball on February 15th—the night of the murder.

"I was in the gentlemen's dressing-room for a great part of the evening," he said. "The prisoner did not appear to be enjoying himself. He seemed to avoid the other guests and to be extremely nervous. He drank a good deal of champagne."

"Did all the gentlemen leave their overcoats in your charge in the dressing-room?" asked counsel.

"Yes."

"Do you swear that Gray's overcoat was there?"

"I do."

"By what circumstance do you remember that fact?"

"By the circumstance that when the prisoner was about to leave he came into the room and took down his own overcoat. I helped him to put it on. Then he put his hand into one of the pockets, and said,

'Confound it, I've forgotten my cigar case!' Then he turned to me and asked me which was Mr. Gray's overcoat. I showed it him, and he felt in several of the pockets."

"Why did he feel in the pockets? Do you know?"

"I supposed it was to get a cigar. But I told him that he would find cigars in Mr. Lucas's smoking-room, and then he went away."

"Can you swear that he did not put something into the pocket of Gray's overcoat?"

"I can't remember. But he might have done so."

During the hearing of these two last witnesses Laurence Gray had sat outwardly still and calm. But within him was a wild tumult of feeling. He knew now that his vindication had come, that his innocence was established. He realised with a rush of conviction how complete had been the course of Vickers's villainy towards him—how from the very first Vickers had consistently endeavoured to direct every little point of evidence against him. He also realised the mistake he had himself made in not gathering a greater body of evidence for his original defence. His conscious uprightness had blinded him to the craft of his more subtle enemy.

Following in the sequence of time, counsel next took the evidence of the police superintendent who took the charge against Laurence Gray on the night of his arrest, proving that on searching him he had found in his overcoat pocket a portion of a silk neckcloth stained with blood. The neckcloth had been identified as the property of the murdered accountant.

The boy, James Stinchcombe, re-examined, gave evidence as to Vickers's return to the office shortly after six o'clock, and swore to Vickers having remained for two hours in the manager's private room. The boy also swore to the fact that after Gray's imprisonment Vickers had received several newspapers addressed to him in the name of John Hardy.

Laurence thrilled as he heard the name of the next witness called: "Richard Harrison Gannaway." So his solicitor had already acted upon the information

he had given him concerning the warder! Gannaway, then, was not to wait for his exposure and punishment until he, Laurence, should be free.

The ex-warder, dressed in plain clothes, entered the witness-box with a firm step. He looked at once in the direction of the dock. Ralph Vickers seemed to gasp for breath Evidently he had not expected this.

Having taken the oath, Gannaway was asked to identify the man whom he had known as Convict R. 99, and to swear to his having been under his charge at Grimley Prison. His eyes rested on Laurence with great reluctance. He was then told to look at the prisoner in the dock.

"I identify him as the man who came to Grimley representing himself to be John Hardy," he said.

"Under what circumstances did you first meet this man?"

"It was in the public-house at Grimley, a few days after R 99 was drafted into that prison."

"What took place on that occasion?"

"He asked me several questions about the prison discipline, and wanted to know if it was in my power to put on the screw, or make it hard for Number 99. I told him that it would be breaking the prison bye-laws, and that I should get into trouble if I did such a thing. He urged me with promises of money. Of course I refused to have anything to do with him. Then he showed me a handful of sovereigns—"

"Well, go on," urged counsel impatiently "You yielded at last and took the bribe?"

Gannaway looked embarrassed, and hesitated. The question was repeated.

"Yes, worse luck. I wish I'd never seen him. The money never did me any good."

"Did you at once proceed to make the convict Gray uncomfortable? Did you inflict greater severity upon him than your position warranted? Answer this question, please; no hesitation."

Gannaway stood obstinately silent. The learned judge interposed, cautioning him that he was bound

to answer every question that was put to him. At last the man sullenly replied :

"Yes, I did make him rather uncomfortable. He was insolent and insubordinate. It's always the way with gentlemen lags."

"Is it true that you repeatedly received letters containing money from the man whom you supposed to be John Hardy ?"

"Yes."

"And that at the same instigation you tried to tempt the convict to suicide by first driving him to melancholy and then secreting a dangerous weapon in his cell ?"

"I suppose there's no use denying it," growled Gannaway doggedly. "You seem to know a tidy lot about it."

"Is it a fact that you stole a private letter from the cell of the convict Gray and sent that letter to Hardy ?"

"Yes. Hardy paid me to do so."

"How much did he pay you ?"

"Ten pounds"

"It is alleged that whilst he was working in the quarries in the heat of summer you denied this same convict his right to have a drink of water, and that you afterwards placed him in a position of such danger that he narrowly escaped with his life. Is that true ?"

"I don't know what you mean," returned Gannaway.

"I refer to the occurrence by which the man Gray was injured in the hand," said counsel—"the occurrence by which another convict lost his life. The inquest held upon the body of the latter convict resulted in a verdict of accidental death. But can you deny that that supposed accident was a deliberate and intentional act on your part—an act by which you sought to compass the death of Convict 99 ?"

"It was by accident that No. 2,000 was killed," answered Gannaway evasively.

"What was the sum which you were promised as a reward if Gray should happen to die ?"

Gannaway hesitated, and glanced first at Vickers, and then at Laurence Gray. Laurence had risen and

stood with his eyes fixed upon him, silently denouncing him, compelling the truth. Gannaway shrank back.

"A hundred pounds," he murmured tremulously.

At this answer there was a groan of execration from the gallery, which was immediately suppressed by the usher. The jury exchanged meaning glances.

"There is one other question I have to ask," continued counsel. "Was it not you who fired upon the convict Gray when he attempted to escape?"

"Yes; but it was my duty. Any officer might do that."

"And you claimed your promised reward, notwithstanding that Gray was not fatally injured?"

"I received the reward," said Gannaway doggedly.

Here the learned judge asked if Warder Gannaway had been brought to trial by the prison authorities. Counsel explained that the governor of Grimley was present in the court, and that he had already been made acquainted with the facts of the case. The trial of the offending warder had only been deferred at the instance of the Home Secretary, who had ordered that Gannaway was to be brought to London to give evidence in the present proceedings.

Turning to evidence of Vickers's movements on that evening, counsel quoted from the official report of the original trial. Vickers had then advanced what the jury had naturally taken as a satisfactory *alibi*. He had said that from about half-past four to six o'clock he had been occupied on the Exchange; that at six o'clock he returned to the office, and wrote letters until nearly eight.

"Now," said counsel impressively, "it is upon this supposed *alibi* that the whole case rests. Vickers had given half-past four as the time that he left the office, Gray having gone out at four o'clock, accompanied by the deceased. The office-boy, Stinchcombe, had said that Vickers went out almost immediately after Gray and Charles Kesteven. But it was obviously to the advantage of Vickers to make it appear that he was in the office at twenty-seven minutes past four, at which time the train left Broad Street Station. We

have now to discover what the prisoner was really doing during that hour and a-half."

The next witness was a dark-visaged old man, who gave his evidence through an interpreter. He was an Italian, named Pedro Silvia, a knife-grinder, living in Houndsditch. He stated that on the morning of February 15th a man had come to his shop and left a large American knife to be ground, and that the same man had called for the knife at a quarter past four in the afternoon, saying he was in a hurry to catch a train. Witness, who produced his account-book showing the entry, "February 15th, grinding American knife, 4d.," identified the knife in court. He also recognised the prisoner, Ralph Vickers, as the man who had brought the weapon to be sharpened, and afterwards fetched it away. Witness knew nothing of the murder until a few days ago when a detective summoned him to give evidence.

John Locker next gave evidence. He described himself as a hansom-cab driver, and stated that on the evening of the Gospel Oak murder he was on the cab rank at Finchley Road Station, on the north London line. He heard the train arriving at five o'clock. A few moments afterwards a gentleman ran out of the station in a flurry, and jumped into witness's cab. He did not seem to know where he wanted to drive to. Witness looked at him through the trap of his cab, and saw him using his handkerchief. The handkerchief was stained with blood.

"You swear to those blood stains?" asked counsel.

"*Rather!*"

"Did you question him concerning them?"

"No sir. I only arst 'im w'ere 'e wanted to go to, and then 'e says, 'Lombard Street, and drive quickly.' I druv 'im there, and dropped 'im at the corner near the Bank. As 'ee were a-payin' of me, I seen 'is 'and quite plain—'is right 'and. It were covered wi' blood. So was 'is cuff. I says, 'Stop! wot's that 'ere blood on yer 'and, guv'nor?"

"What explanation did he give?"

"None. Before I could git darn from my seat,

'e'd run off into the fog. But I know'd 'im agin. I know'd him three weeks ago when I was put to watch 'im outside Lucas & Co's orffice ; and I knows 'im now. That's 'im standing there in the dock ! "

The counsel for the prosecution then remarked that this concluded his case.

" I had supposed," said the learned judge, " that you intended to put the convict Gray into the witness-box."

" Such was my original intention, my lord," was the reply ; " but Gray's entire ignorance of the circumstances connected with the crime makes it impossible for him to throw any further light upon the matter. I may add, however, that the instructions he has given to his solicitor have been most useful in aiding us to elucidate certain points and circumstances which must otherwise have been ignored."

CHAPTER LVII

THE VERDICT

Much to the surprise of everyone in the court, Ralph Vickers's counsel intimated at this juncture that he did not intend to call any witnesses for the defence.

Hereupon the counsel for the prosecution again rose. He made a lengthy and powerful speech, in the course of which he set forth with great ability the full evidence against Vickers, and gave it as his opinion that never had a murderer's guilt been more clearly and unmistakably proved. The prisoner, he said, was a man whose whole career had been a record of duplicity and covert crime. It was singular that on the occasion of the former trial no inquiry had been made into his character and antecedents. Had it been then suspected that he had served a term of imprisonment for forgery, a stricter account would surely have been exacted as to his movements on the afternoon of the murder. That, in spite of the publicity given to his name as a witness in the trial, nothing then transpired concerning

his past life was probably due to the fact that his former exploits had been performed under an alias. Beginning with this conviction for forgery, he had gone on to embezzle money from his employer Mr. Christopher Lucas, and it was assuredly those embezzlements that had led him indirectly to the committal of the crime for which he now stood in the dock.

Counsel then proceeded to recapitulate the circumstances under which, according to his own theory, the murder took place He stated that never before, within his recollection, had there been a case in which the probability of guilt had been so ingeniously transferred from the actual culprit to a person absolutely innocent. He dwelt severely upon the cruel deceit and treachery of the prisoner towards Gray, whose only sin against him was that his honourable uprightness and many abilities drew from the world—and from Mr Lucas's family in particular—an appreciation and favour such as Vickers himself could never hope to win. He urged that the malignant ferocity with which, through the medium of Gannaway, Vickers had pursued Gray contributed largely in itself to warrant their assumption that he was guilty of the murder. Counsel further appealed to the jury to consider the ruin of Gray's life, his narrow escape from an ignominious death, his loss of good name, his degradation, his most terrible and bitter sufferings, and finally demanded the extreme penalty of the law against the man who had not only perpetrated one of the most cold-blooded and brutal crimes ever revealed in criminal history, but had also plotted—and successfully plotted—to fix the guilt of that crime upon his innocent friend, and had finally striven his utmost to thrust this deeply injured friend into a madman's cell or a convict's nameless grave.

The speech for the defence was a brief one. Vickers's counsel prayed the jury in considering their verdict to set aside all prejudice occasioned by the prisoner's other acts and to judge him solely with reference to the present case. However deeply their sympathies might have been touched by the sufferings of the convict Gray, they must not let their compassion for one man

lead them blindly into injustice towards another. He asked them to concentrate their attention upon the crucial question as to whether Ralph Vickers, leaving his office shortly after four o'clock, could by any possibility have gone round to Houndsditch, procured the knife, and still have caught the 4.27 train at Broad Street. In conclusion, he argued that the whole evidence against Vickers was vague, and that it was insufficient to justify them in returning a verdict that would carry with it the most terrible penalty that the law can impose.

Silence greeted the close of this address. A gleam of hope, lurid and transient, illumined Vickers's face, but the nervous motion of his sinuous fingers as they clutched the rail of the dock betrayed how abject was the fear that still possessed him. This fear grew keener, and the hope died utterly as he listened to the judge's summing up. In this supreme speech every feature of the evidence was considered, and every point against him was brought forward with convincing lucidity and power. There could be no doubt as to the conclusion that had been arrived at in the judge's own mind.

The jury then retired. After an absence of no more than a quarter of an hour they returned into court. The foreman, in reply to the question of the Clerk of Arraigns, said:

"We find the prisoner guilty. We wish also to express our sympathy with Laurence Gray. After careful consideration of the evidence, we are unanimously of opinion that the miscarriage of justice, of which the unfortunate convict has been the victim, was mainly due to the perjury and duplicity of Vickers. We further desire to express our hope that the proper authorities will speedily communicate the verdict to the Queen with the purpose of obtaining for Gray Her Majesty's unconditional pardon and his immediate release."

Laurence Gray drew a deep breath. A smile of relief lightened his pale and worn features. He looked at Geraldine. On her face, too, a dawn was breaking —a dawn of gladness and peace of heart and radiant hope. Her eyes, brilliant with joy, met his and gave him promise for the future; the faint colour on her

cheeks deepened to a glowing crimson. But her look grew grave again when the sonorous voice of the judge rang through the court, asking the prisoner if he had anything to say why sentence of death should not be passed upon him.

Vickers, so fiercely cruel in evil doing, was a coward now. He had not really thought that it would come to this. Livid and quivering in every muscle, he answered without looking up:

"Nothing. I am guilty!"

His sinking voice and terror-stricken aspect sent a shudder through the assembly. Even on Geraldine's face there came a look of pity. He lifted his eyes once and saw that look. A spasm crossed his features—a spasm of resentment, hatred, and bitter regret. Then he crouched down again in the dock, seemingly deadened to all that was passing around him—deadened even to the solemn words that filled the court-room with the slow pronouncement of his doom—the words that had dazed the brain of Laurence Gray nearly two years before:

"The sentence of the Court is that you shall be taken from the place where you now are to the place whence you came, and thence to the place of your execution, and there hanged by the neck until you are dead. And God have mercy on your soul."

Lower and lower Vickers cringed in his abject terror. The gaolers approached him to lead him away. At the touch of their hands he started violently, and looked around the court. As his eyes fell upon Laurence Gray, his lips moved quickly as if he were striving to speak. But no sound came. Terror and defeat had paralysed his utterance.

A moment later his place in the dock was empty. He had gone from the free world for ever.

Before he was removed from the court, Laurence Gray took one long, straining look at Geraldine's radiant face. The same wish was in both their hearts—the wish to clasp hands, to utter forth their overwhelming relief and joy. But Laurence was conscious still of his cropped hair and his humiliating garb. Leaning

over to his solicitor, he whispered, disjointedly, in his deep emotion:

"Say to Miss Lucas—that I implore her not to try to see me. I cannot bear that she should see me again—like this. But I shall soon be free—very soon—"

Then, amid a murmur of sympathy, he was led from the court and taken back to his cell, there to await that formal redress of injustice which is known as Her Majesty's pardon.

For him the gloomy prison had suddenly lost its gloom; his step was light on the stones of its corridors, and his face glowed with his great inner joy.

He felt no bitterness against Fate for what he had suffered in the past. He saw only the promise of the future—glorious, rich with love and peace. But at thought of the man who had wronged him, a shadow darkened his happiness. The desire for vengeance had passed from him. He felt pity now for the miserable wretch who, somewhere in this same prison, was waiting for death.

He saw Vickers in chapel on the following morning. The doomed man was sitting in the chair of the condemned, close under the pulpit, with a warder beside him; he seemed shrunken and stupefied with fear. Never once did he turn his head or raise his eyes. And yet he must have known that Laurence was in the chapel—Laurence, no longer the scapegoat, but triumphant, serene, on the threshold of freedom.

Possibly, if Vickers's paralysing terror left him power to think, he imagined Laurence Gray to be gloating over his suffering, rejoicing in anticipation of the dreadful retributive penalty that awaited him. But it was not so. Laurence knew, as few men can know, how awful a thing it is to stand in the shadow of the death punishment; how the brain reels at it, and the heart faints, and the limbs tremble and grow weak. He pitied Vickers—even Vickers the evil-hearted, who was in very truth a murderer, and therefore, according to the law, had justly merited the doom whose foreshadowed horror made the coward blood curdle in his veins.

Thus, solemnly, in the chapel at Newgate, Laurence

Gray looked his last—for ever—upon the man who had brought him his life's great ordeal

On the fourth day after the trial there arrived at the prison, by a Queen's messenger, Her Majesty's pardon for the man who had been known as Convict 99 With it there came the order for Laurence's release, and at three o'clock in the afternoon he passed out from the gates of Newgate a free man

Free—free again! No longer hunted and persecuted, watched by suspicious eyes, compelled to slink in byways, and hide in corners, but free to go wheresoever he liked; to walk in open day with his head high, and his glance fearlessly meeting the glance of his fellow-men Oh, that great blessing of freedom, of which men think so little, how sweet it is!

Laurence paused for a moment to look back at the dark walls of the prison Not in heart alone, but in appearance, he was a different man from the Laurence Gray who had entered that place nearly two years before. His face was lined, his eyes were more earnest and his hair at the temples had a silver sheen But he did not think of this in that moment He only remembered that he was free, with the stain cleared from his name—free to go to Geraldine and draw her to his heart and claim her as his own.

CHAPTER LVIII

FOR EVER AND EVER

THE December twilight was falling when he reached the gates of Fenton Court. Then, for the first time, he asked himself—Was he fit to see her? His hair had not had time to grow to even an inch in length, and he had chosen rather to be shaven clean than to go to her with the stubbly beginnings of a beard and moustache. But his clothes were good, he had had them sent to him at Newgate, so that he might leave the prison in the attire of a gentleman. And she who had clung to him when all others condemned him would

not now be repelled by the last few outward signs of an ignominy that was past and gone.

He went up to the house. From the drawing-room windows bright streams of ruddy firelight shone out into the darkening garden. Some instinct told him that Geraldine was in that room, and with a word to the footman, Pearse, he went there unannounced. He opened the door softly. She was there and alone, sitting by the bright log fire, whose leaping flames cast a wavering glow upon her dreamy face and shining hair and the silken folds of her dress.

He sprang to her and threw himelf on his knees beside her chair, drawing her sweet face down to him, clasping and kissing her hands.

"Laurence!" Her startled voice rang like an outburst of glad music. "It is over, then? You are free?"

"Yes, I have come back to you, my darling—a free man."

There was a long, long silence. Then Laurence felt tears dropping upon his hand—his worn and coarsened hand which yet so confidently clasped hers.

"Geraldine! You are crying!"

"It is for joy," she murmured. "Only for joy," she added, with a smile. "I feel my weakness now that the strain is past."

He looked up at her face as the firelight shone upon it. Its purity and beauty filled him with a sudden doubt of himself.

"Geraldine," he cried desperately, "am I worthy of you now? I am not the Laurence Gray to whom you gave your love. Look at me, darling. Think well before you let me claim you for ever. I am a changed, worn man, soul-scarred and prematurely old, with a shadow on my past which nothing can remove. Your husband should be fresh in heart—should have had no stain upon him—"

He broke off, silenced and comforted by the love-glow in her eyes. She clasped his upward-turned face between her hands, and bent her own face down tenderly to his.

"Not a word against yourself, Laurence. It is I who should be proud—proud to give myself to a man who has proved himself to be brave and true and noble and strong. It is me whom the world should envy. Dearest, in my eyes, and in those of all rightly-seeing people, you are better and grander than of old, far worthier to be honoured, and therefore to be loved. Were it not for the bitter pain and shame you have endured, I should bless God for the shadow of these two years. It makes happiness seem richer and more glorious. If we had not suffered and despaired, could we have felt what we feel now?"

"No my darling, no! And this at least I can say: that my heart has been true to you always, true and pure, and worthy to hold you, and for your sake and by your guidance, true to God."

The twilight deepened. A solemnity seemed to pervade the shadowy room where the stillness was so intense that the flickering of the log flames and the beating of those two hearts in unison seemed almost audible.

This was the first evening for two years that had found Laurence free. He could scarcely realise the blessed truth. He repeated the word to himself as he gazed up into the beautiful eyes that smiled such promise upon him.

"Free! Geraldine, can you feel all that that means? No warder is coming to-night to lead me to a cell—to brand me again with the mark of Cain—to treat me as a dog, a brute, a lost, soulless thing! I am free to stay with you here for hours, and to-morrow I shall be free to come to you again—free to love you all my life. Think of it—for ever and for ever! Oh, Geraldine!"

His voice broke into a sob. She clasped her arms closer about his neck, and they stayed thus, steeped in silent joy, heart to heart and soul to soul.

After a long while—they could not have told how long—the door was opened. They sprang asunder. A dark figure advanced into the room.

"Mr. De Lacy!" exclaimed Geraldine.

"Do I interrupt you?" asked Jacques de Lacy anxiously. "I thought Mr. Lucas was here."

"Papa is asleep in the library," said Geraldine, with a smile. "This is Laurence."

De Lacy advanced into the circle of the firelight. Very changed was he now from the Number 1,007 of Grimley and Jedwood. His hair and moustache had grown and were well-trimmed; his dress was neat, and his whole appearance that of a gentleman.

At Geraldine's announcement he gave an exclamation of joy. The two ex-convicts met and shook hands warmly. Never had even the hands of brothers grasped each other with deeper sincerity or truer affection. At that moment Pearse entered with lamps. Geraldine, murmuring that she was going to see her father, went from the room.

"You are looking remarkably well, Jack," observed Laurence. His voice was light; but the traces of his recent emotion still lingered on his face. "Freedom evidently agrees with you. I am sure no one would dream that you had ever worn a convict's dress in Grimley or—"

"Hush!" appealed De Lacy. "For the love of Heaven let me forget what has passed. Don't remind me of it. I am another man now, and mean to keep so. I am on the right road, thanks to you and to Miss Lucas. Ah, if you knew what an angel she has been to me!"

"I can guess," murmured Laurence softly.

"I went to her, as you bade me," pursued De Lacy, "and she did not despise me. She welcomed me, helped me, sheltered me. She saved me from the shame of being hounded about London, watched by detectives' eyes. She saved me from despair and the horrors of temptation. And yet all the while she showed me how evil I had been; taught me the loathsomeness of crime and the grandeur of an upright life. She made me promise her that I would not fall again. I have sworn to her that I will not, and now I swear it to you."

"May God help you to keep your resolve," Laurence Gray said solemnly.

"He will. He will," quickly rejoined De Lacy. "Don't be afraid that I shall ever go wrong again. I have promised you and her, and I shall not break my word. I would as soon break it to the angels of God!"

He spoke with nervous, passionate earnestness, looking into Gray's face. For all reply Laurence placed his hand on his friend's shoulder, and let it rest there for a moment in sign of confidence and sympathy. They heard the soft, stately steps of Geraldine returning.

"Father is awake," she said. "He is coming to us here. He is eager to welcome you, Laurence."

"How is he, dearest? Better than when I saw him last?" asked Laurence, his conscience reproaching him for having forgotten the old man in the fulness of his own supreme joy.

"Yes," answered Geraldine. "But not yet well. The cares of business are weighing too heavily upon him. But he expects soon to be relieved from such anxieties," she added, smiling at Laurence. "He is going to retire."

She stopped, perceiving her father standing in the doorway. Mr. Lucas advanced into the room slowly. Laurence realised for the first time how greatly his benefactor and future father-in-law had aged in the past two years of anxiety and reflected sorrow.

"I shall retire in favour of my son," the old man said playfully, yet gravely, looking the while intently from the face of his daughter to the face of the liberated convict whom she had loved so loyally. His countenance grew brighter as he thus contemplated them. After a moment he added: "I shall have a few weeks abroad with you after your honeymoon—and then you must come home and direct the firm, Laurence—my dear, brave boy!"

* * * * * * *

On a certain morning Jacques De Lacy called early at the rooms of Laurence Gray. The expression of his face told Laurence why he had come.

"Have you heard anything?" he asked anxiously. "Is it over?"

De Lacy nodded. "Yes, I stood outside Newgate at eight o'clock. I heard the bell of St. Sepulchre tolling, and then above the gray old walls of the prison I saw the black flag mount slowly and wave in the breeze. He has suffered his doom."

"May God forgive him and have mercy on his soul!" said Laurence, in a subdued voice. And he buried his face in his hands and was silent for many minutes.

* * * * * *

Three weeks later, the marriage of Laurence Gray and Geraldine Lucas was quietly celebrated in a little Hampstead church. The sun, which had long been hidden behind the gray clouds of a London winter, shone forth that morning to bless the bride. It blessed her as she knelt before the altar in her bridal simplicity of whiteness; it blessed her again as afterwards she walked down the aisle by her husband's side. And brilliantly still it shone upon her when, wrapped in protecting furs, from out whose darkness her delicate face rose like a gleaming flower, she smiled a half tearful yet wholly sweet good-bye to the father who was for a little while to lose her, and got into the carriage that was to bear her and her wedded lover away on the first stage of a honeymoon that shall last their whole lives through.

THE END

Miller, Son, and Compy., Ltd., Printers, Fakenham and London.